



## Block 1

# Homer and the Greek 'Dark Age'











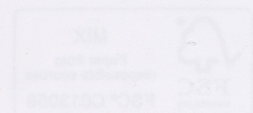
The Open University

A219 Exploring the Classical World

Block 1

# Homer and the Greek 'Dark Age'

Chris Emlyn-Jones and Naoko Yamagata





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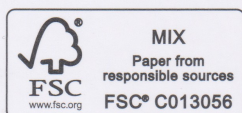
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# Introduction to Block 1

## Block timetable

This block comprises six weeks' work: that is, five study weeks and a final week to write TMA 02. During these study weeks you will also be given time to complete the short close reading and analysis exercise, TMA 01, which is placed at the end of Week 2. Each part of the block corresponds roughly to one week's work and the course weeks are indicators of where you should be in your studies at any point. You will need to keep roughly to the timetable in this block in order to complete the TMAs at the appropriate time. This block will indicate how the work is divided up, and you can also consult the Study Calendar.

## Aims and objectives

- 1 To make you familiar with the main events and developments in the earliest period of Greek civilisation.
- 2 To enable you to appreciate and critically analyse the artistic qualities of the Homeric poems, and to explore the social structure and moral values of Homeric society.
- 3 To help you to study the visual sources from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (pottery, architecture, sculpture) in their artistic and social context, and in particular how they relate to Homer.
- 4 To use your knowledge and skills, acquired in points 1–3 above, to make argued judgements about the culture and society of the Homeric period.

## Materials required

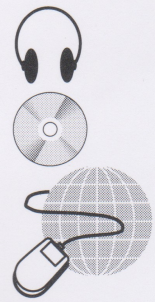
To study this block you will need:



- Lattimore, R. (trans.) (2002) *The Odyssey of Homer*
- *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization (OCCC)*
- *A Brief History of Ancient Greece: Politics, Society and Culture (BHAG)*
- Book of Essays: *Experiencing the Classical World (ECW)*
- Readings Book 1
- Audio-Visual Notes 1



- Assignment Book
- CD1
- DVD1
- Course website



## General orientation

It may be useful for you to have some kind of advance knowledge of what kind of work you will be doing in this block.

Following this brief introduction, the whole of Parts 1 and 2 will be concerned with an in-depth study of the *Odyssey* of the epic poet Homer, looking at the poet as a literary artist, methods of composition, presentation of themes, and treatment of myths and legends. In Part 2 you will be introduced via CD1, 'Reading the Homeric texts' to the skills of critical reading of the poetic text, including issues relating to the reading of texts in translation. (On general issues connected with reading in translation in this course, see Section 2.3 of the Course Introduction.) This will lead to TMA 01, which will be a short exercise (500 words) in close reading and analysis of a passage from the *Odyssey*. (Time will be allowed for this exercise during the week's work.)

In Part 3 you will be looking at the other major epic of Homer, the *Iliad*, and exploring how the society depicted in the poems works and what its distinctive values are, including exploration of the tensions involved in pursuing honour and fame.

Part 4 will be a study, parallel to Homer, of the other major sources from the period, visual art (with DVD and exercises). As with the poetic text, this will concentrate on the skills involved in 'reading' the physical objects. There will be a study of form, function and interpretation of individual objects and a broader discussion of the society from which they come, with references to parallels with poetic texts.

Part 5 sees a return to Homer, and a broadening of the context. At this point you will be required to bring together the knowledge and skills you have learned in the block so far to consider the bigger picture of the Greek 'Dark Age' (see below), with some extra material, in particular an extract from the major near-contemporary of Homer, Hesiod. There will also be some exercises in historical and geographical orientation, making use of the course website.



In Part 6 you will work on TMA 02, an essay of 1,000 words, which will test the skills of critical reading and construction of argument learned in Block 1. You will be given help in what is required by the essay topic and in the technique of constructing an essay.

### **A note on 'Dark Age'**

This is a convenient way of describing the earliest period of Greek culture which we are concerned with in this course (roughly, the eleventh to eighth centuries BCE). This description is a modern invention (the Greeks did not refer to it as such, hence the quotation marks around 'Dark Age' in the block title). We call it the 'Dark Age' because, from our point of view, comparatively little is known in detail about the society and culture of Greece throughout most of these centuries. However, as you are about to discover, this period did witness the creation of major epic poems, regarded by later generations of Greeks and Romans as the greatest literature ever produced. The question of how far such literature is evidence for the society in which it was created will be postponed for the moment: there will be more in-depth discussion of this and other issues associated with the 'Dark Age' later in the block (Part 5).



# Part 1 Reading Homer's *Odyssey*

## 1.1 Starting with the poem

We are shortly going to plunge straight into the course by starting with the *Odyssey* of Homer. Reading part of an epic poem may initially seem a strange beginning to a course on Greece and Rome. Before starting this course you may have expected to be studying evidence, chiefly of a documentary kind, through which you would gain an insight into the culture of the Greeks and the Romans, and then proceed to look at some of the artistic creations of the given period: literature, art, and so on. As far as Block 1 is concerned, this approach will not work, for the simple reason that such contemporary documentary sources do not exist. One relevant factor is that the physical means of recording permanently – writing – was not extensively used throughout most of the period we are concerned with in this block and, as we shall see, when it was, it was not used initially for what we would now recognise as social or historical documentation. The historical treatment of this period comes from historians writing several hundred years later whose accounts, relying as they inevitably did chiefly on oral traditions and legends, tend to be unreliable. It therefore makes sense to start by looking at a major work of culture and then work outwards from it to an understanding of the contexts in which it was created and to which it refers.

We are, however, not starting with the *Odyssey* merely in default of other evidence. The Homeric poems (the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*) represent one of the outstanding (the Greeks and Romans themselves thought *the* outstanding) artistic products of the ancient world. They also represent in a special way a society and culture which was to have a unique influence on later centuries. Moreover, the poems have exciting plots and vivid description and characterisation which make them, the *Odyssey* especially, particularly approachable for those encountering the ancient world for the first time.

Just before we begin, a couple of further points of orientation:

- 1 In an age when, as you have just learned, there was not a great deal of writing, it may seem paradoxical to point to the creation of two poems totalling some 25,000 lines of verse. The composition of the poems is generally placed towards the end of the eighth century (c.720–700) BCE. (See the timeline for Block 1 on the course website or the timeline on p.xvi of *BHAG*, which gives a much wider time frame than we do for the composition of Homer.<sup>1</sup> The timeline for Block 1 is also



<sup>1</sup> Lack of the appropriate evidence at this period (in particular, written records) makes precision of dating difficult, and often very much a matter of interpretation.



given in Appendix 2.) This is the period when we have some evidence for the emergence of writing in the Greek world. The Greek alphabet is derived from the Phoenician script, probably introduced into the Greek world via trade links with the Levant (Eastern Mediterranean) and so may be related to the opening up of Greece to external influences towards the end of the eighth century BCE through increased international trade. So are the emergence of writing and the composition of Homer more than a happy coincidence? Many scholars argue so, some even suggesting that the alphabet may have been introduced and developed in order to write down the Homeric poems. However, the only contemporary evidence of alphabetic writing we have consists of 'graffiti' scratched on vases (see Figure 1.1 below); the

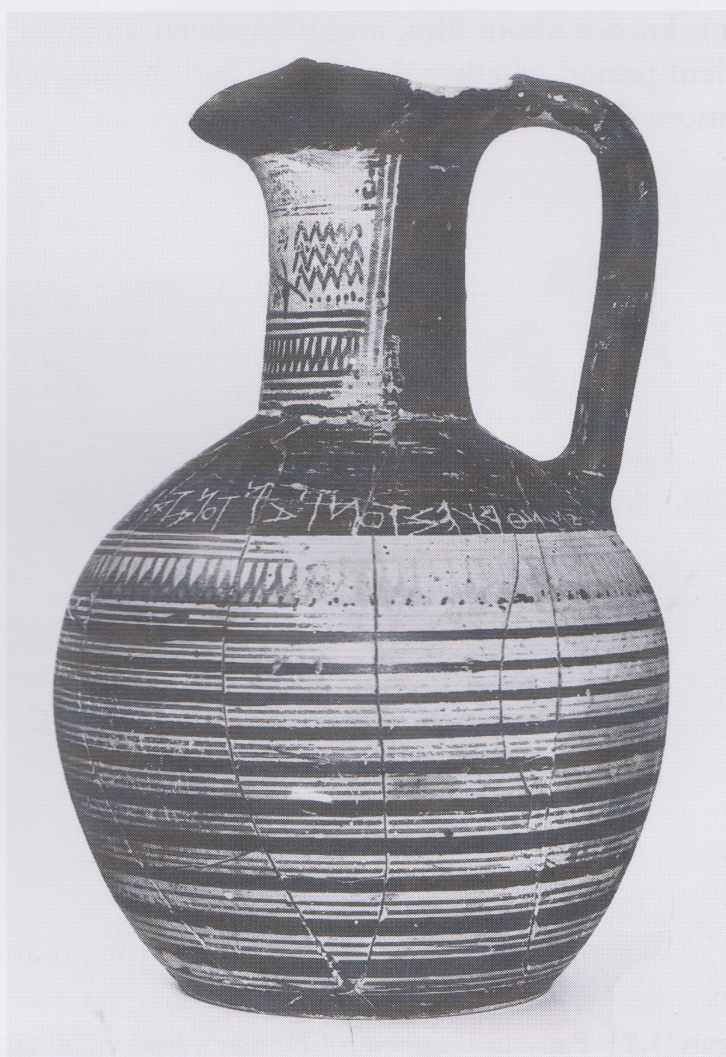


Figure 1.1 Late-Geometric Attic jug, c.735–725 BCE, from the Dipylon cemetery at Athens. National Archaeological Museum, Athens, inv no.192 (2074). © Ministry of Culture, Archaeological Receipts Fund. Incised on the shoulder is probably the earliest Greek alphabetic inscription so far known, a complete hexameter (Homeric-type verse) line: 'who now of all the dancers plays most gracefully (?shall win this prize?)'.



business of inscribing the whole of Homer at this time does not seem feasible from a purely technical point of view, nor is there a scrap of evidence that it was attempted. Indeed, the association of the alphabet with the Phoenicians suggests (though again there is no surviving evidence) that a more likely stimulus for writing was the need for a durable medium to record transactions involved in international trade. It is worth noting that actual physical survival of Homer's text dates from much later, into later antiquity and the medieval period (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

- 2 Just as we do not know exactly when or how the poems were composed, neither do we really know who composed them. We habitually use the term 'Homer' to describe the poet, but almost nothing is known about him, and it has been a matter of dispute since the ancient period whether the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are by the same or two or more different poets.

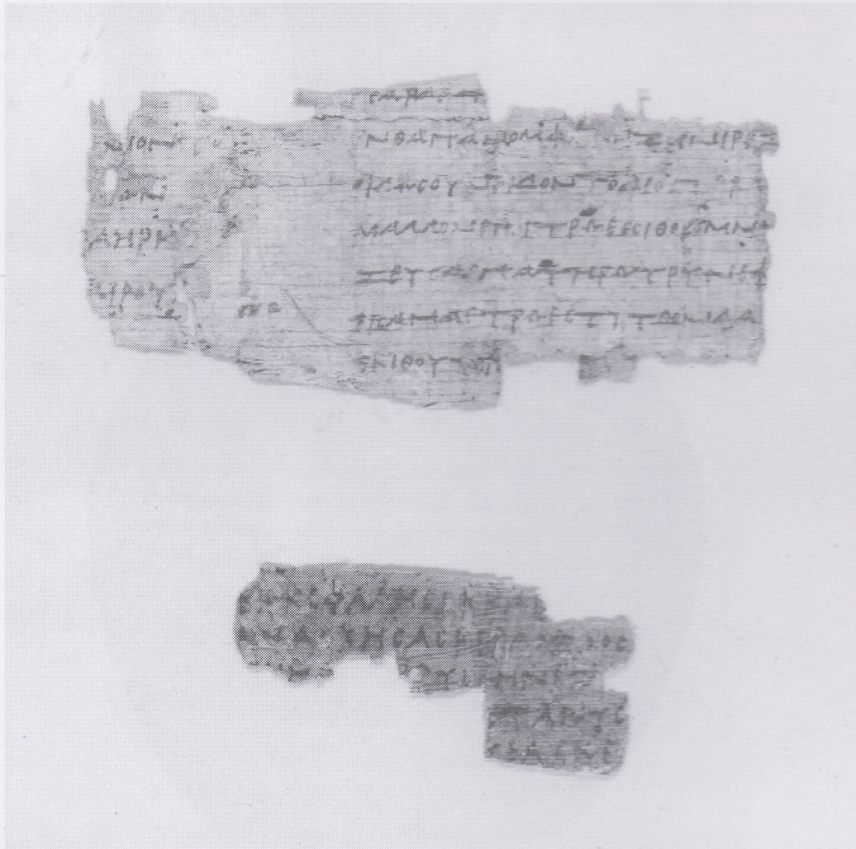


Figure 1.2 Papyrus fragment of Homer's *Iliad*, c.250 BCE. Photo: British Museum 639a. From G.S. Kirk (1962) *The Songs of Homer*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Plate 8a. By permission of the British Library. Pieces like this, preserved regrettably only in fragmentary form in the dry atmosphere of Egypt, are a valuable source for the text of Homer, pre-dating by some 1,200 years our earliest surviving manuscripts of the poems. (See Figure 1.3 below and Figure 1.6, 'Transmission of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*').



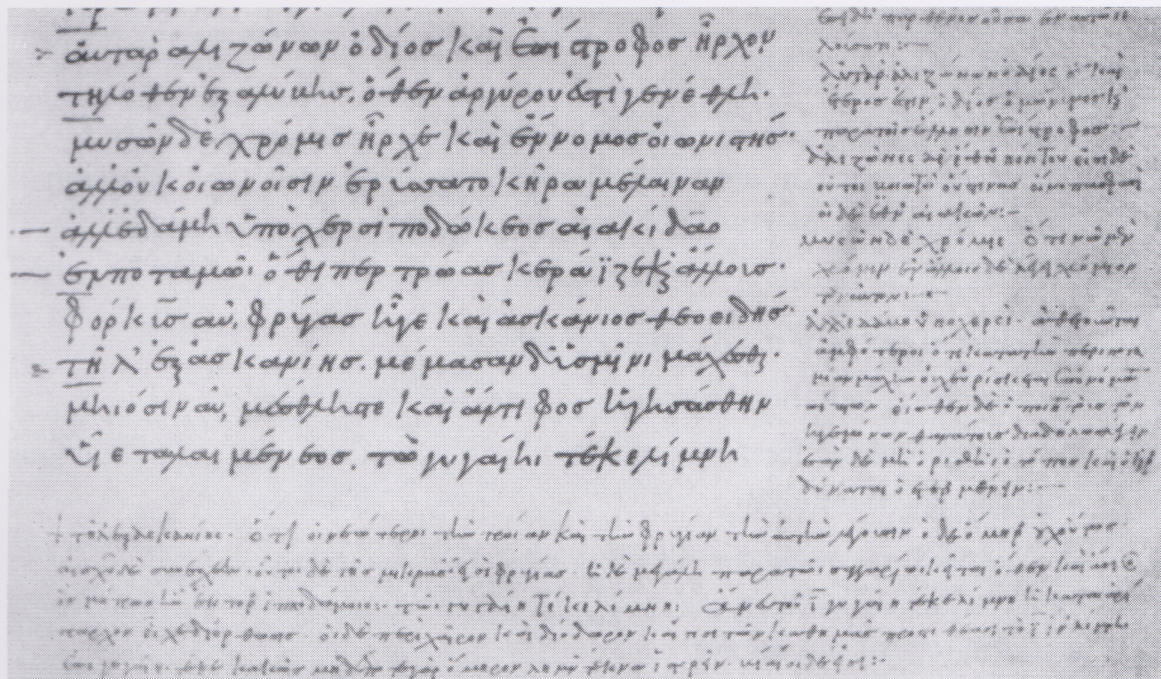


Figure 1.3 An early manuscript of the *Iliad* (known as Venetus A, tenth century CE), Biblioteca Marciana, Venice. The manuscript shows Book 2.856ff. (part of the Trojan section of the Catalogue of Ships, the survey of the forces of the Greeks and the Trojans). Note that the text is accompanied by marginal notes (known as *scholia*).

You may find starting with this degree of authorial uncertainty disconcerting. (Note, though, that Homer is not unique in this respect; we have a similar situation with a number of other epic poems such as the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and the Babylonian *Gilgamesh*; we shall be returning to these issues in Part 5 of the block.) When you have studied (and, I hope, enjoyed) some of the *Odyssey* and later the *Iliad* you will be in a much better position to tackle the broader questions. If, however, you wish to know more at this stage and have time in hand, you will find *BHAG*, pp.43–52 and the entry on ‘Homer’ in the *OCCC* helpful.

## 1.2 Homer, *Odyssey*: an initial encounter

An ‘encounter’ is what this is intended to be; you do not need any previous knowledge of the story or any details in it.

For names or events you may find puzzling, running notes on the *Odyssey* Books 1–4 are given in Appendix 1 at the end of this block. And don’t forget the pronunciation guide on the course website if you find this useful. (Note that Lattimore uses the ‘Greek’ form of names in his translation, whereas in the pronunciation guide and throughout the blocks we have chosen uniformly to use the Latinised spelling: for example, ‘Telemachus’ rather than ‘Telemachos’. This should not be a problem, and you are free to choose either convention in your written work.)





## Exercise

Read lines 1–112 (pp.27–30) of the *Odyssey* in your set book, *The Odyssey of Homer*. You are advised to skip the translator's introduction for the moment. As you read, you should aim to gain a general impression of:

- the kind of poem it is, the style of writing;
- the structure, key themes and concerns of the poet.

We're not looking for any profound insights at this stage, just your first impressions. Note that:

- the points I make will be developed beyond what you could be expected to know from just reading, but in each case my starting point is in the text of the poem;
- when considering 'style', you may have at the back of your mind that what you are reading is a translation; for the moment don't worry about this. Accept, for the sake of argument, that the translator has done a good job, and note your general impressions. (We shall be considering issues associated with the translation of Homer in more detail in the second part of CD1 in Part 2 of this block.)

Return to the block when you have attempted the exercise.

## Discussion

You may have come up with a number of things, and your list is unlikely to be exactly the same as mine, though I hope it overlaps at some points. You are obviously not expected to get all the detail, just some of the basic points, which will be elaborated in the discussion below.

## Style

- 1 The tone, from the first words, sounds dramatic and declamatory rather than private (try reading the first few lines aloud). The poet's first words need to be arresting, and he sounds as if he is speaking in the presence of a large audience and is asking the goddess to tell him the story, which he is presumably passing on to others: 'Tell me, Muse ... '(1). He speaks both in his own person as narrator and also in 'imitating' others like an actor (in this case, gods and goddesses) in speeches. The speeches are formally introduced: 'Then in turn the goddess gray-eyed Athene answered him' (44); 'Then in turn Zeus who gathers the clouds made answer' (63). One might call the



language 'high-flown', but often direct: for example, 'Oh for shame' (32, in Greek an exclamation of surprise or anger); 'Why, Zeus, are you now so harsh with him?' (62). There are also images and expressions which sound unfamiliar in English, for example, 'My child, what sort of word escaped your teeth's barrier' (64, strikingly odd to us perhaps, but perfectly comprehensible).

- 2 Note in particular a distinctive feature, combinations of adjective and noun. Words appear attached as adjectival descriptions to particular individuals: for example, 'godlike Odysseus' (21), 'gray-eyed Athene' (44), 'Zeus who gathers the clouds' (63). You might ask why these are always the same. This is an important feature, the significance of which we will return to in the section on 'Formula and generic composition' in Part 2.

## Content

- 1 The first thing that might strike you is that the structure is carefully laid down at the outset. The whole section outlines a programme and starts the movement of a very long work: the divine figures are planning to bring home the much-travelled and much-suffering hero Odysseus (the 'man' of line 1) to a potentially fraught and dangerous situation in his island of Ithaca (87–92). The start (following the 'invocation' to the Muse, the goddess of poetry, 1–10) is immediate and dramatic.
- 2 The nature and behaviour of the gods and goddesses may have struck you as interesting and, in some respects, unusual. They have concern, even feelings, for mortals: for example, we learn that Odysseus is both loved by Athena (48) and hated by Poseidon (69). They also interact with each other very much like humans (e.g. 64ff.) and live together as a (frequently quarrelsome) family on the peak of a high mountain. As all-powerful beings they can make things happen down below and their appearance here at the outset is obviously to get the plot going. (Odysseus has to be rescued from the clutches of Calypso, and Telemachus needs to be encouraged to assert himself.) The gods are also like humans in appearance (though much larger and more splendid) and they can be won over by human devotion in the form of sacrifice (25 and 67); their 'anthropomorphism' (human shape), human type of behaviour and partiality for individuals are key characteristics of the Greek conception of divinity right through Greek, and indeed Roman religion, manifested in art as well as in literature; you will therefore be meeting it again. For examples, see Figures 1.4 and 1.5 below.





Figure 1.4 Zeus with thunderbolt. Bronze statuette from Dodona, north-west Greece, c.470 BCE, 13.5cm. Antikenmuseum Staatliche Museen, Berlin. © Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. Photo: Jutta Tietz-Glagow. An example of 'anthropomorphic' presentation of a god, in human shape.



Figure 1.5 Athena and Poseidon. Attic Black-figure neck amphora by the Amasis Painter, c.530 BCE. Cabinet des Médailles, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris. ABV 152.25. The pot is signed 'Amasis made me'. The deities are anthropomorphically depicted as humans.





- 3 The 'Homecomings'. We are looking at the aftermath of a major 'event', the war at Troy (see *BHAG* or the map on the course website) and the sacking of the citadel by the Greeks (2). We know roughly in archaeological terms when the Trojan War was supposed to have happened, if it happened at all; there is no conclusive archaeological evidence for this event (see the *BHAG* timeline on p.xvi under 'Military Events', or the course website timeline for Block 1, also printed in Appendix 2 to this block). For Homer and his audience, however, it is simply an event in the legendary past, and Odysseus one of the Greek heroes involved in it. From the point of view of the action of the poem it has occurred some ten years previously. The poet is concerned with its aftermath, the 'Homecomings' or, in Greek, *nostoi* (5, 13, etc.). (The Greek word *nostos* means 'return home', an idea with great emotional resonance for the Greeks, and for us also, hence 'nostalgia', meaning 'homesickness' or 'yearning for the past'.) Surrounding the *Odyssey*, which has as its plot the dramatic situation generated by the homecoming of Odysseus, are frequent references to the *nostoi* (plural of *nostos*) of other heroes involved at Troy. That is the point of the rather abrupt introduction by the god Zeus of the reference at 35–6 to 'Aigisthos' and 'Atreus' son', which you no doubt found rather baffling; 'Atreus' son', also called 'Atreides' (40), is Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek force against Troy (whom you will hear more about when you look at Homer's other poem, the *Iliad*). His homecoming to his palace at Mycenae in southern Greece (see the map on p.xxii of *BHAG*) was disastrous, as he was murdered on his return by his wife's lover, Aegisthus. The *nostoi* of the principal Greek heroes at Troy and their various fates (good and bad) were the subject of other poems in what is known as the 'Trojan Cycle', only fragments of which survive. Homer's brief allusion to another legend on this subject here is typical (his audience would have been thoroughly familiar with the stories) and gives us an idea of the broad canvas, on a part of which the poet is working – he specifically tells us his personal starting point (9–10). And the choice of Agamemnon here points up the dramatic tension: will Odysseus suffer a similar fate – to be killed on his return?
- 4 I'd like to finish this study with a general point, which you may have sensed, even if not entirely consciously: the sense of geographical space and displacement in the idea of wandering, journeying and physical danger which is conveyed by this opening. Many of the Greek heroes, like Odysseus in this poem, were forced to take a very roundabout route before they reached home (you will be reading in Book 4 about what happened to Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus).



Many of the leaders perished, like Odysseus' companions (6–9). We know from archaeological sources of evidence that the late Bronze Age was a civilisation of powerful centres dominated by large building complexes we call 'palaces' (e.g. at Mycenae). When this civilisation broke up (c.1100 BCE) shortly after the supposed date of the Trojan War, there was a period of social and economic chaos characterised by the destruction of these palace centres, migrations and the escapes of people fleeing from the chaos. The poet can have known little of the detail of this, but the idea of space, wide horizons, strange lands and adventure still pervades the *Odyssey*.

This brief exercise has aimed to give you a taster of Homer's poetry. Before you leave this section complete the exercise below.

### Exercise

Read through the remainder of Book 1 (to p.38) noting, as before, what you judge to be points of interest. You should also locate Odysseus' and Telemachus' home of Ithaca on the map in *BHAG* (p.xxii) or on the eDesktop. It is on the western side, near the edge of the map, half-way down (next to the much bigger island of Cephallenia).



### 1.3 The 'Telemachy'

In this section we will be exploring further the artistic qualities of the poem, choosing some longer sections of Books 2 and 3.

The *Odyssey* as a whole is obviously too large a structure for us to cover adequately in the time available for this block, so in the remainder of Part 1 and in Part 2 we shall take a chunk of it, the four books concentrating on the person and experiences of Odysseus' youthful son Telemachus, called by modern commentators the 'Telemachy' (the activities of Telemachus). These four books cohere as a whole, though whether they had any independent existence in Homer's time is not known. In practice we shall be concentrating on the first three books, and you will be asked to read Book 4 on your own (although there will be some exercises on Book 4 connected with CD1 in Part 2).

In fact, although it is not required for the course, if you have time either now or later, you are warmly encouraged to read the whole of the *Odyssey*, which you have available in your set book. It is a thoroughly good read and not for nothing has been called a prototype of the modern novel, and has had a considerable impact in modern poetry and film.



Why start a poem by more or less ignoring the hero and concentrating on his son?



You may already have noticed in your reading that Odysseus is not actually ignored. Although he does not appear in person until Book 5, his is a glaring absence which is continually alluded to and which motivates the action in Ithaca; there is a power vacuum caused by the absence (missing, presumed dead) of the legitimate ruler (the *basileus*, 'king' or 'chief'), Odysseus. His father Laertes has long ago 'retired' due to feebleness and old age, and his son Telemachus is only just beginning to assert an authority which precipitates the crisis and his clash with the suitors, who, in the absence of firm authority, try to 'muscle in' (something which may well have been a feature of Greek 'Dark Age' society – see, for example, *BHAG*, p.48). The focus of their attention, and their excuse for living off Odysseus' estate, is Penelope, who is, they believe, bound to marry one of them.

That is the situation expressed in prosaic terms: what does Homer make of it? We are concerned here with presentation: how the poet conveys the situation to us, where he puts emphasis, and so on.

We shall now examine this question by isolating two specific episodes in Books 2 and 3. For factual details, you may again consult Appendix 1.

## The Assembly in Ithaca



### Exercise

Read lines 1–259 of Book 2 (pp.39–46), taken up chiefly with the public debate in Ithaca over the political situation, commonly known as the 'Assembly'. I think you will agree that the presentation here can be called 'dramatic'; one can almost stage the whole scene in one's mind. In reading this scene, consider how the poet conveys the drama. Think initially in particular about:

- the proportion of authorial narrative to direct speech;
- what each contributes to the whole.

These may at first not seem very clear or easy questions, but when you have done the reading, write down your thoughts.

### Discussion

- 1 To take the first point, there is a very high proportion of speech-making to narrative in these lines. In the poems in general Homer both narrates (conveying events, descriptions and feelings in his own words) and also imitates his characters (i.e. he speaks through their mouths). In looking at what each mode of presentation contributes,



let's take the 'background' (i.e. narrative) first. (Follow up my references in the text as you go.)

This comes over to me rather like the stage directions to a public or 'crowd' scene:

- (a) At the beginning Telemachus is presented as unusually assertive and 'in charge', convening the Assembly 'like a god in presence' (5), and taking his father's seat (14). His appearance (aided by Athena) corresponds.
- (b) Various speakers are also characterised. The first, an old man, is in tears, and we learn why (17–24): the fate of his son, which incidentally briefly opens up the background of the war at Troy and an unpleasant incident (related by Odysseus in more detail in Book 9). We also have an insight into divided loyalties: one son who sides with the suitors (21–2).
- (c) Telemachus' extreme anger, conveyed in his words (leading up to 79), is underlined by his reported actions (80–3). (Note the prevalence of tears in the poem – no stiff upper lips here!) The guidance of the action on a higher plane by gods and other forces (a feature of Book 1) is conveyed by the omen of the two eagles as confirmation, it seems, of Telemachus' words (130–54). And don't forget stage-manager Athena in the background!
- (d) Note also the small details with which the poet illuminates the characters. Characters are given significant epithets which describe them: for example, Telemachus, in his reply to the attack of Antinous, leader of the suitors, is appositely described as 'thoughtful' (129) and his supporters speak 'in kind intention' (160, 228). See how many other small details of this kind you can spot in the narrative part of the scene.

- 2 Now for the spoken part of the scene. The dialogue consists of speeches, formal in the sense that they are not interrupted. This gives us a very good picture of the poet as 'impersonator' (i.e. he speaks not as narrator, but as the person speaking, for example, Telemachus or the suitors). We have, of course, no way of knowing exactly how this was performed, how far the poet took on different personalities or acted (though I am tempted to assume that the style was pretty flamboyant, judging from what we know of 'rhapsodes', later performers of the Homeric poems). The tone of the exchange is strongly 'rhetorical' (a term which you will be hearing again in later blocks of the course; rhetoric is a key characteristic of ancient literary culture). In each of these speeches the principal antagonists face one



another, and we get a clear sense of the animosity felt by Telemachus against the suitors and vice versa. There are a number of aspects to this:

- (a) The speeches convey attitudes, particularly marked in the case of the leading suitors, whose unpleasant personalities are clearly presented in the verbal abuse and threatened physical violence they direct at Telemachus and those who dare to support him (e.g. 187ff.).
- (b) However, the speeches also allow both sides to make a case, and these have the larger purpose of allowing us to appreciate the conflict in more detail: the suitors are pressing for the hand of Penelope, Telemachus' mother, an action they initially wish to present as reasonable, on the assumption of Odysseus' death (e.g. 194ff.).
- (c) The speeches also convey chronological depth; this situation has been going on a long time. The story of Penelope's trick of delaying her remarriage by weaving and then un-weaving Laertes' funeral robe, as told by the leader of the suitors, Antinous (87–128), makes us aware of the almost unbearable pressure she has been under, and how long there has been a virtual siege of Odysseus' palace.
- (d) The speeches can also be appreciated in the light of the knowledge the poem has already given us. For example, what Homer has told us in Book 1 has provided the essential background here: we can listen to the account of Penelope's actions, related from the suitors' point of view by their leader Antinous, in the knowledge that his apparent reasonableness is all a sham. We know of the suitors' unacceptable behaviour as unwanted guests, as demonstrated in Book 1; we can hear the account of what should happen to her, as a passive woman to be disposed of by Telemachus and her father, in the light of her passionate reaction to her claustrophobic isolation (one might almost say 'imprisonment') as related in Book 1. We also learn from Book 1 how far Telemachus' dilemma over how to cope with the suitors is intimately related to his strained relationship with her, a scene we shall be returning to in more detail in Section 2.1 below.
- (e) Above all, the speeches convey character: the suitors' words tell us the kind of men they are. Especially in Book 2, Eurymachus (178ff.) reveals the element of naked power and disregard for Odysseus' house which the suitors exhibit in their actions – note the epithet for the suitors in Book 1:



'haughty' (106, etc.). Telemachus is passionate and, appropriate to his comparative immaturity, given to anger and tears (80–1), but his words have a deep effect (82: 'Now all the rest were stricken to silence').

Finally, I would like to make a general point about the Assembly, which relates to something absent in the political and social structure: any idea that there is participation in decisions by the people of Ithaca (whoever they may be – Homer's Athena describes them as 'Achaian warriors': Book 1.272). An 'Assembly' suggests formal procedure, debates and decisions; we have plenty of the former, but decisions seem to be in the hands of individuals, watched by a largely silent and passive majority. The words of the old man Aegyptius at 26ff. ('Never has there been an assembly of us or any session / since great Odysseus went away in the hollow vessels') makes it clear that the absence of Odysseus has paralysed formal decision-making for twenty years (the time Odysseus has been away). If Telemachus' aim in calling the Assembly is to gain support for action against the suitors, he is disappointed. The people of Ithaca clearly do not have enough power, authority or simply the will to help Telemachus against the suitors (this issue will be taken up in more detail later in the block).

This may be intended to represent an exceptional situation, or Homer may here be reflecting in a general way a relatively informal state of government of the 'Dark Age' of Greece, where little part is played by those who were not leaders. (See the discussion of the Ithacan social and political situation in *BHAG* pp. 48ff.). But Homer is not a social historian. In looking at society through the eyes of a poet, it is always necessary also to take into account what that poet is primarily trying to do – present a narrative dramatically and vividly. Telemachus needs to be presented as politically isolated and lacking support, and the suitors need to be unstoppable at this point, just as Penelope must come across as despairing and isolated, in order to begin the major dramatic movement of the story.



## Homecomings

For the second of our three studies of scenes from the Telemachy, we are going to look at the *Odyssey*, Book 3, and the reminiscences of the aged hero Nestor who rules over Pylos, situated in the south-western corner of the Peloponnese (see map, *BHAG*, p.xxii). As often in Homer, we are presented with a contrast: Ithaca, as we have seen, is a society in disruption, whereas Pylos presents the image of peace and orderly rule, emphasised at the





beginning and end of Book 3 by the rituals of receiving guests appropriately (*xenia*) and sacrifice. Whereas in Ithaca, Athena, disguised as an old friend of Odysseus (Mentes) has to be entertained quietly and surreptitiously because of the suitors, in Pylos, Nestor rules supreme as a patriarch (contrast the elderly Laertes, Odysseus' father in Ithaca, Book 1.189ff.). Nestor can give the guests (with Athena present again in another disguise) full ceremonial welcome, surrounded by his numerous family.

Nestor (whom you will be meeting again in Part 3, when you study the *Iliad*, Book 1) brings with him the world of the past, which in the *Odyssey* means principally the Trojan War in which he, already as an old man, has taken part. In the *Iliad*, being past his prime as a fighter, Nestor is a giver of advice, tending to the 'when I was younger ...' type; in the *Odyssey* this is taken further; he is now a dispenser of lengthy reminiscences, delivered with much mournful gusto to a captive audience. Note that the request from Telemachus for information about his father draws a 98-line reply (3.103–200) from Nestor, which starts with a verbless sentence and rambles on (3.103ff – can you find the main verb after 'since ...' in 103?) and only incidentally mentions the subject Telemachus is anxious to know about.

Nestor, like the poet of the *Odyssey* himself, is telling a story, and again like the poet, it is a story of homecomings (*nostoi*: see Section 1.2 above). Impelled dramatically by Telemachus' desire to know about his father, Nestor's long answer brings in most of the Greek heroes and what happened to them in their attempts to get home after the war. The part of the expedition to Troy he covers – the aftermath – is not part of the events of the *Iliad*, but Nestor's audience and the external audience (those listening to the poem) are clearly presumed to be already familiar with the legendary events: for example, to know what is 'the great city of the lord Priam' (107) and to have some idea of what the men who 'not all were considerate nor righteous' (133) had done to incur the wrath of 'Athene's deadly anger' (145).



### Exercise

Now read 3.103–328, the homecomings of the principal heroes, as related by Nestor. You are not expected to master all the details of what happened to whom, but I would like you to concentrate particularly on the *nostos* of the hero Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition to Troy. The relevant details are to be found at lines 141–7, 193–200, 234–5 and 247–75. (Note that 'Atreides' in 193 is another name for Agamemnon, his patronymic, 'son of Atreus'.)

While reading:



- 1 note down the details of who murdered him;
- 2 consider how the narration of this incident relates to the wider theme of this part of the poem. Where have you heard of the death of Agamemnon before? Why do you think that the poet returns to this theme again and again?

### *Discussion*

- 1 We are told several times that Agamemnon was murdered by Aegisthus, a kinsman of his who stayed at home when Agamemnon went to war and who seduced his wife, Clytemnestra. According to Nestor, Clytemnestra ultimately became involved in the plot to kill her husband.
- 2 Taking the last of these questions first: the fact that the poet returns to this theme several times in the narrative signals its importance. We met the theme very near the beginning of the poem (1.35–43), where Zeus uses what happened to Aegisthus after the murder as an object lesson in what happens if humans ignore divine warnings. More broadly, the fate of Agamemnon seems to have two main aspects for the structure of the poem:
  - (a) It is somehow connected with the anger of the goddess Athena. We are not told here what this is about (though look at the notes in Appendix 1 on 3.133) but Agamemnon is directly implicated ('poor fool', 3.145, a rare personal comment by the poet); Athena has had it in for Agamemnon (among others) from the moment Troy was captured.
  - (b) The Agamemnon 'return theme' is introduced as a continual counterpoint to that of Odysseus. Athena is angry with Agamemnon, but loves Odysseus, so (the audience can be reassured) Odysseus will ultimately be saved. Meanwhile, Telemachus must take a lesson from Agamemnon's son Orestes (cryptically referred to without name at 196–8), who avenged his father by killing Aegisthus. Telemachus must be brave and grown-up if it comes to the point and the suitors try to take over. Furthermore, Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, is introduced as a counterpoint to Penelope: although Clytemnestra's 'nature was honest' (3.266), 'when the doom of the gods had entangled her' (269), she finally gave in. The hope is that Penelope is different from Clytemnestra; under pressure, and with the gods favourable, she may still remain faithful to her husband, as Clytemnestra did not.



If you just compare this scene with our discussion of Book 2 above (in the first part of Section 1.3) you can perhaps see how the poet is weaving rich contrasts on a central theme – that of homecoming – and the problems of absence, social disruption and potential disaster, or resolution. In Book 2 the focus is on the immediate danger to Odysseus' household from the suitors and Telemachus' increasing awareness and maturity. This latter theme is continued in Book 3, but Nestor's contribution broadens out the theme; the immediate situation is put in the context of the more general fate of Greek heroes returning from a far-distant war, Agamemnon's fate and the moral contrasts and warnings this affords.



### Exercise

Before you leave this section, read Book 4.512–47, yet another version of the death of the returning Agamemnon, this time recounted by Menelaus to Telemachus, as it had been told to him by Proteus in Egypt, when he (Menelaus) had been driven off course trying to reach home himself. Don't worry for the moment about the context, just note the following points.

- 1 In this version there is yet more detail of exactly what happened, especially from Agamemnon's point of view. His murder is no longer simply a cautionary tale; Menelaus is intimately involved, hearing for the first time of his brother's death, hence his violent reaction at 538–40. The effect of the continual repetition of the story is not just for emphasis, but by adding details reveals the differing perspectives of the different tellers and audiences as the whole episode is gradually revealed. It gains depth and substance as a shattering family revelation, a cautionary tale and (for the audience) a well-known legendary event.
- 2 On this occasion the whole episode is longer than the others and becomes a miniature drama, with reversal of fortune: Agamemnon's relief at escaping from the storm (521), kissing his home soil (522), followed by Aegisthus' treacherous greeting and murder of Agamemnon while feasting 'as one strikes down an ox at his manger' (535). (You might like to note, in passing, that the dramatic potential of this story – the deluded man who in his ignorance met a fatal end – did become fully realised later in fifth-century BCE tragic drama, especially in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where Clytemnestra, rather than Aegisthus, assumes the principal role.)



On a thematic level within the dramatic structure of the poem, the overall effect of continually returning to the different aspects of this story is, as we have seen, to emphasise its importance as a potential lesson for all three members of Odysseus' family: his wife, his son, and, of course, himself. Unlike Agamemnon, a man seeming to lack a degree of cautionary insight (remember Homer's 'poor fool', 3.145), Odysseus, 'the man of many ways', is presented as the antithesis, a resourceful man who always thinks before he makes a move. Likewise, Penelope is a wife with an absent husband who does not give in to social pressure, and Telemachus is a son who needs to be prepared, if need be, to act like Orestes, Agamemnon's son, and avenge his father by killing whoever may marry Penelope. But all three, unlike Agamemnon, have the inestimable advantage of the support of the gods.

### **Odysseus: absent yet present**

The *Odyssey* is a poem of great structural sophistication, not least in the way it deals with time, notably in the long 'flashback' of Books 9–12, where Odysseus recounts all the adventures of his wanderings since he has left Troy (up to the time we find him on Calypso's island in Book 1.14), a series of events which actually occur before the main action of the poem begins. This may not be fully apparent when you're only reading the first few books. However, you will have noticed that the poem also starts off in a daring way, not with Odysseus himself, but with Ithaca in his absence; Odysseus himself does not appear until Book 5.

We have already remarked on the fact that the main action of the poem begins without its central character (see Section 1.3 above). Let's look for a moment at how the poet deals with this.

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### **Exercise**



Reread Book 1.115–17, 253–69, Book 3.120–29 and Book 4.235–89. While reading, consider the following questions:

- 1 What do we learn about the character of Odysseus in these passages?
- 2 What is the dramatic effect of references to Odysseus?

### **Discussion**

- 1 Let's start with the last passage. This consists of two short stories told by Helen and her husband Menelaus to the visiting Telemachus about his father. Both stories are reminiscences and take us back, as Nestor did in Book 3, to the Trojan War. Helen, who had been abducted by the Trojan Paris, had begun to regret her choice (she tells her audience) and wanted to go back to Menelaus. The story of Odysseus'



daring spying expedition within the walls of Troy in disguise brings out his two most prominent qualities: his endurance (Book 4.244) and his ingenuity as a spy (remember, in the first line of Book 1 he is 'the man of many ways'). Menelaus' story demonstrates the same qualities and introduces one of the best-known incidents of the Trojan War, the ruse of the wooden horse, which Odysseus had devised, and through which the Greeks captured Troy. So Odysseus is a clever, versatile man (as Nestor confirms at 3.120ff.). But he is also a man of strength which he can exhibit when necessary (Book 4.287). It is this quality which comes through in the passage you have read from Book 1 (and there are a number of others you can find): the wish that Odysseus will come home, and that, if he does, his prowess as a fighter will set everything right.

- 2 The dramatic effect can be summed up in the word 'foreshadowing'. The wish that Odysseus will come home and see to the suitors anticipates what actually happens in the second half of the poem (Books 13–24) when Odysseus does do precisely that. Helen's story of Odysseus the beggar in disguise also prefigures what actually happens: in Book 13, Odysseus does return disguised as a beggar and endures hardship before he finally succeeds in regaining his kingdom. This extensive foreshadowing of events has the effect of binding this first part of the story closely to the latter part (by continual reference the poet keeps Odysseus 'there' in spirit throughout the episodes in Ithaca, Pylos and Sparta). The dramatic suspense is generated both by the assumptions of his death by his enemies and the desperate hopes of his friends and family – that Odysseus is going to succeed where others (notably Agamemnon) failed.



### Exercise

To complete this week's work, read the first part of Essay Three, 'Sing Muse: authorial voices in Greek poetry' (up to 'This is a typical mode in which Homer operates', pp.69–78). This essay considers the importance of the 'poet's voice' in the Homeric poems. It will also give you a foretaste of Homer's other great poem, the *Iliad*, which you will study in detail in Part 3 of this block.

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This concludes the work you have been asked to do in exploring some aspects of the artistic and dramatic qualities of the *Odyssey*. We are now going to look in some detail at what we know, or can conjecture, about how the poet we call Homer composed.



## Part 2 Homer: verse-making and composition

In this week's work we will be looking further at the *Odyssey*, and in some more detail at the circumstances of composition. This will be followed by some CD exercises on reading Homer which will lead up to your work on the first short TMA.

We are now going to take a closer look at Homer the poet, and at how he composed. You have already learned that when it comes to Homer's biography, who he was and where he came from, there has so far been a notable absence of detail. (Even to talk about 'he' and 'his' is a convenient shorthand, and involves an assumption about gender; the late nineteenth-century novelist, painter and translator of the *Odyssey*, Samuel Butler, wrote a book called *The Authoress of the Odyssey*.) As I also mentioned above, since ancient times (not long after the poems were composed) commentators have been divided as to whether there was one composer for both poems or whether the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were by different authors. As to where 'he' lived, the ancient traditions make it most likely that the composer or composers of the Homeric poems lived in Ionia (the coastal region of Asia Minor, east of the Aegean Sea), the Greek city of Smyrna (now Turkish Izmir) being one of the most likely candidates, but by no means the only one.

Why did the Greeks, even from a few generations after the composition of the poems, seem to know so little about their creation and the identity of the poet(s)? One obvious factor, looking at it from our point of view, is the apparent absence of a written text. We now tend to take for granted the clear identity and ownership of an artistic work afforded by the physical existence of a text, but the earliest evidence for a written text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* comes from more than one hundred years later than the supposed period of composition, by which time these poems were clearly attached to a poet called Homer. We're talking here about *evidence* for a written text; for the *physical presence* of actual texts, let alone anything which survives up to the present time, we have to wait until much later, as you can see from Figure 1.6.



Figure 1.6 Transmission of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

- 1 Homeric poems reach their final form as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, c.725–675 BCE, preserved (orally) by ‘Homeridae’ (followers of Homer) at Chios.  
⇓
- 2 Interest in Homeric poems at Athens under Peisistratus, c.530–510 BCE (recitation at the Panathenaic festival?)  
⇓
- 3 Athenian tragedies dramatise Greek legendary stories, including Homeric, c.500–400 BCE.  
⇓
- 4 Literary criticism with much reference to Homer (e.g. Plato and Aristotle, 400–320 BCE). (Much quotation suggests texts of *Odyssey* and *Iliad* in circulation?)  
⇓
- 5 Age of Alexandrian scholarship in Egypt. Homeric text edited and studied (at this period, each poem divided into 24 books), 300–100 BCE. The earliest surviving Homeric fragments were written on papyrus and date from the third century BCE.  
⇓
- 6 c.100 BCE–CE 1300. Graeco-Roman and then Byzantine scholars at Pergamon, Rome, Athens and then Constantinople publish books on Homer. (Oldest complete surviving manuscript of Homer (Laurentius) tenth to eleventh centuries CE.)  
⇓
- 7 First printed edition of Homer at Florence (CE 1488).  
⇓
- 8 Critically edited and prepared scholarly texts of Homer based on surviving manuscripts and papyri. Richard Bentley of Cambridge develops the science of textual criticism in the early eighteenth century.  
⇓
- 9 Standard modern scholarly text of Homer, the ‘Oxford texts’: *Odyssey* ed. T.W. Allen (2nd edn, 1917); *Iliad* ed. D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen (3rd edn, 1923).  
⇓
- 10 Modern translations: Lattimore, Rieu, etc.



The broader aspects of the questions raised in this paragraph are discussed in more detail in *Experiencing the Classical World*, Essay Two, 'The Homeric poems: ancient and modern perspectives', the whole of which you will be asked to read later in the block.

The initial question we are going to ask in this section is: how were the poems composed?

## 2.1 Circumstances of composition

The first place we might look is in the poems themselves. In your reading of the *Odyssey* in Part 1, you will have noticed that most of the principal characters tell stories, several of them long ones, with considerable artistic and dramatic skill. You will also have come across one minor character whom one might call a 'professional', a performing poet, Phemius, the bard attached to Odysseus' household, who towards the end of Book 1 is entertaining the suitors of Odysseus' wife (as they wrongly suppose, his widow), Penelope.

---

### Exercise

Reread carefully the scenes involving Phemius (1.150–5 and 325–59). Consider what we learn from the narrative and dialogue about the following:

- 1 the performance;
- 2 the context of the performance.

### Discussion

- 1 *The performance*: Phemius is singing a song (326) about homecoming (*nostos*) which resonates with the theme of the *Odyssey* as a whole. As the poet has implied right at the beginning of the book with the example of Agamemnon (35–6), this was 'bitter' for all of the Achaeans. So we have a 'story within a story', as it were, which has vital relevance to the main theme of the poem, the return of Odysseus. Phemius is clearly choosing from a repertory of songs relating to the Trojan War which he knows very well. We learn that he is 'singing' a 'song', not reciting. The Greek word *aoidos* ('singer', 'bard') suggests an element of musical delivery reinforced by the presence of a lyre (153), a wooden frame between which four strings were stretched (see Figure 1.7), with which he accompanies himself. An unexpected addition is the agency of the goddess Athena in the 'bitter homecoming' (326–7), whose involvement we have no reason yet to suspect, though it is





obviously not news to the audience: Penelope's reaction (341) clearly indicates that Phemius has sung a song on this theme before. From the evidence of this passage it is not clear whether Phemius is repeating a song already fixed or improvising his own, but the excellence of his performance (155, 346) implies that there must be something in content or execution which distinguishes him as superior ('divine singer', 336).

- 2 *The context:* This is a song after supper (150) and is quite frequently, though not here, it appears, accompanied by dance (152). (For actual dancing accompanying the singer's performance, see *Odyssey* 8.262–5.) Phemius is attached to Odysseus' household, but note that he sings for the suitors under compulsion (154). The setting is fairly informal; we learn that the suitors (a rowdy lot, by all accounts) listen in silence (325–6) held, it appears, by the magic of the song, but at the same time their diverted attention gives Telemachus cover to have a discreet conversation with Athena. Very revealing is the dialogue which follows (337–59): Penelope and Telemachus have an argument over the singer's freedom to choose the song he sings, with Telemachus upholding his right to please himself 'as the thought drives him' (347) and emphasising the importance of novelty for success, thereby embodying, as one modern commentator has put it, '... the earliest literary criticism in Greek literature' (West, 1988, note on *Odyssey* 1.346ff.). This all seems to go a long way towards supporting the idea that the singer is not only the performer but the composer of the song. And he has a large repertory on which he can draw at a moment's notice (337–9). (Contrast the depiction of a near-contemporary bard in Figure 1.7 with the more 'staged' and 'glossy' later depiction in Figure 1.8.)

Let's now come back to the original purpose of the previous exercise: to what extent is the Phemius episode in Book 1 relevant to an understanding of how the Homeric poems were composed? Drawing on the work you have done so far in this block, we are going to consider how relevant the episode you have just studied is to this question.

However, before we do that there is a preliminary question which needs to be asked: what will count as relevant? The answer to this question is, as for many issues you will be meeting in this course, not straightforward; there is unlikely to be a 'yes or no' answer (i.e. 'Yes, it is relevant' or 'No, it is not relevant'. Note that this tends to be revealed by the form of the question: 'to what extent?', implying gradation). What is required is a balanced argument which gives fair weight to all the issues. A useful way of preparing the ground for such an argument is to consider points 'for' and 'against' (i.e. for relevance and against relevance).





Figure 1.7 Detail from a late-Geometric Attic jug, c.730–725 BCE, National Archaeological Museum Athens, inv no.17497. © Ministry of Culture, Archaeological Receipts Fund. This illustration is very close in date to the presumed date of composition of the Homeric poems. The lyre-player may be an *aoidos*, a bard, though we can get no closer to what he was performing, or in what circumstances.

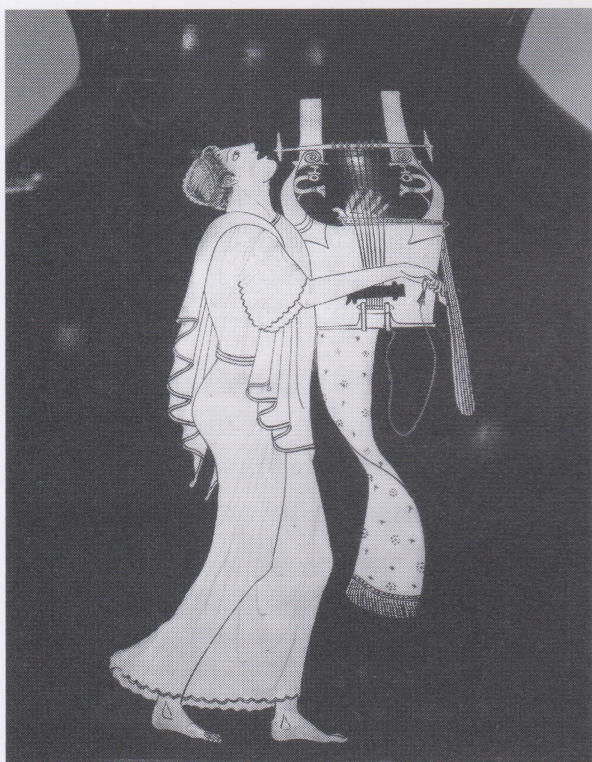


Figure 1.8 Red-figure amphora, attributed to the Berlin Painter, obverse: young man singing and playing a *kithara*, terracotta, height 41.50cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1956 (56.171.38). Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Contrast the much earlier image of the player in Figure 1.7.



## Exercise

Before you continue, think of up to two points on each side of the argument, and then write them down: first ‘for’ and then ‘against’. (You do not need to gather new detail to answer this; just take a few minutes to consider and reflect on what you have learned so far.)

## Discussion

- 1 Points for (‘Yes, the Phemius episode is relevant.’)
  - (a) The singer has in his repertory songs about the Trojan War, which is the subject matter of Homer, and in this particular case closely parallel to the overall theme of the *Odyssey*. We might then imagine Phemius, or another singer, performing, like Homer, a *nostos* of Odysseus. Which returning heroes Phemius focuses on here are not specified – he hardly had time for them all! – though Penelope’s tearful reaction might suggest that Odysseus was in there somewhere. And (a general observation), like Homer’s, his poems tell stories.
  - (b) The poet of the *Odyssey* puts particular emphasis on performing singers in rulers’ houses. (There is another one in the *Odyssey*, Book 8, called Demodocus; you will meet him in Part 5 below.) It might be thought significant that Homer should give particular prominence to his own profession.
- 2 Points against (‘No, the Phemius episode is not relevant.’)
  - (a) The length of Phemius’ performance, in comparison with the extent of the *Odyssey*. This entertainment after supper (30 minutes) cannot compare with a massive epic, which if performed right through would take several days, allowing the singer to have breaks. What social occasion, of the kind described in Book 1, could contain a work of this length?
  - (b) The world of the *Odyssey* purports to be that of the time of the Trojan War and its aftermath; the social setting is that of a household of that period. The poet is, in key respects, concerned to avoid anachronism (i.e. importing ideas and objects from his own day). An example of this is the almost consistent reference to bronze as the metal for weapons and armour (hence the ‘Bronze Age’), as opposed to iron, which had been introduced for this purpose by the eighth century BCE. So would he not have been careful to make the singer fit that context, and not his own?



The second point against was slightly unfair, since you could not have been expected to know about bronze and iron. Even so, you still might have trouble in deciding which side 'wins' here, and in fact there is no clear winner. 'Points against' might seem to you, on the face of it, stronger than 'points for', but the argument is not over: there might be a 'comeback' to both the 'points against' above. On the first point against: clearly the whole *Odyssey* might not be performed 'after supper' but sections of it might have been. It is a notable fact that the *Odyssey* does divide quite neatly into four book sections, a notable one being the 'Telemachy', much of which you are reading here (Books 1–4, though note that the divisions into books do not go back to Homer and probably originated much later). Still a very long evening, but conceivable in a way that a performance of the whole *Odyssey* is not.

On the second point against: care in reference to the actual period in which the poems are set (avoidance of anachronism) is much more obvious in specific details, such as armour and weapons. How far the description of social institutions is historically accurate is a much more difficult question. *BHAG* (p.44) works on the assumption that the social context of Homer can be related to a period some generations before the composition of the poems, and certainly not to the late Bronze Age (i.e. the time of the supposed Trojan War). So Phemius, as part of the social set-up, might be closer to Homer than the doubters suppose. Further, it might be argued that in order to 'hold' an audience, as Phemius did the suitors, the singer would have to introduce situations which were near enough to their own everyday experience to be credible and interesting, but just far enough away to give the poem an aura of mystery with, for example, gods and goddesses who appear in person and have intimate relationships with humans, well beyond the experience, one assumes, of Homer's audience. (We will be considering these issues in Part 4, on DVD1 in connection with architecture, and, on social structure, looking critically in Part 5 at the assumptions of *BHAG*.)




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I hope the impossibility of a 'yes or no' answer to the original question has been demonstrated; the exercise was a little artificial because we just do not have enough information yet, and there are a lot of 'hypotheticals'. You will find that many of the arguments you are asked to construct in this course do have at their base this kind of attempt to balance evidence and make a judgement (although the above is rather a crude example and later, you may be relieved to hear, there will be more evidence available to work with).



We are not at the judgement stage yet, however. You may have noticed whole areas not touched by the discussion, a notable one being exactly how the poet composes. In his discussion of Phemius, Homer makes it clear that the performance was excellent, compelling and ‘magical’ (329) but, for our purposes, this remains rather vague.

And I have not said very much about a vital component of a performance, the audience. We do not know anything directly about Homer’s original audience. However, the argument of Telemachus and Penelope over what sort of song Phemius should be singing, besides being very revealing about their fraught mother–son relationship, also suggests that the audience may have an important role in choosing a theme for the singer to perform in his recital.

On the audience role, there is another significant performance later in the *Odyssey*, that of the bard at the Phaeacian court, Demodocus. (The Phaeacians are the people in whose territory Odysseus is washed up by a storm in Books 5–6. The song takes place in the course of entertaining the incognito Odysseus.) Demodocus sings two songs: the first, accompanied by dancing (8.266–369), tells a story of the gods, a humorous and fairly scurrilous tale of the amorous entanglements of Ares (the god of war) and Aphrodite (the goddess of love), which incidentally demonstrates that legends of human war and adventure were not the only topics chosen by singers, and that in such stories making fun of the gods was acceptable. The topic of the second story is chosen by Odysseus himself, the story of the Trojan wooden horse (8.486–532). (You have already met an account of this incident at 4.265–89, in the section ‘Odysseus: absent yet present’ on p.24 above.) What I want to draw your attention to here is Odysseus’ reaction: he cries bitterly, with a memorable image comparing his tears to those of a captive woman lying over the body of her dead husband (523–30). This image is called a *simile*, and you will shortly be looking in more detail at one of these. There is a lot that could be said about this episode (and we will be returning to it later in Part 5.4); for now, note the extreme reaction of Odysseus to the song, which may reflect a more general and noisy emotional reception to singers. There is later evidence from the rhapsode Ion, a reciter of Homer (fourth century BCE), that an extreme emotional reaction, laughter and tears, was common, and was what the performer aimed to elicit from the audience (Plato, *Ion* 535c–e); no quiet, tight-lipped modern European listeners refraining from emotion until it is time for applause!

## 2.2 Oral poetry and ‘literary’ analysis

We have just looked at a possible general context of composition. But if we try to be more precise about how it was done, the Phemius episode (see



previous section) may seem to us, as I mentioned a moment ago, rather vague: 'fine' or 'magical song' (lines 155 and 329) does not get us very far in analysis.

I've pointed several times to the apparent paucity of writing at the time Homer composed the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. The analogy of the Ithacan bard Phemius (and remember there were problems with this episode as an analogy) suggested that the poet composed and delivered poems on the spot and without the aid of writing (i.e. orally). Here we need to consider a bit further what we mean by oral poetry. I have put quotation marks around 'literary' in the title of this section because of the connotations this word may have for a modern observer – analysis of what a poet carefully composed, line by line, writing the verse down on paper in solitude, even if, as is often the case, he/she may deliver it orally to an audience, at a poetry festival or similar occasion. Does this modern practice give us any clue as to how Homer composed? Do the length, complexity and quality of the poem suggest that it must have been carefully planned in advance, even if the poet delivered it orally? We may think so, but do our modern assumptions apply to Homer?

### **Formula and generic composition**

Rather than search for an answer off the top of our heads to this rather general question, let's go back for a moment to the text. In reading you must have noticed that you encountered frequent and often exact repetitions of phrases to describe repeated states or actions. (You may remember I referred to this aspect of Homeric style in Section 1.2.) It seems that Homer, rather than creating a new phrase, prefers to make do with the same one with minor variations: for example, beginnings and endings of speeches are often formally introduced and rounded off with 'Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to her in answer' (e.g. 1.213), 'Then in turn the goddess gray-eyed Athene answered him' (221, etc.).

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### **Exercise**

What other types of repetition have you noticed in the course of your reading? Look quickly back over Books 1–3 and write down any other types of repetition you can spot.



### **Discussion**

The most common and noticeable feature is what is called 'noun + epithet'. These are combinations of one or two words describing individuals: of gods, features describing their power: 'Zeus, father of gods and men', 'Poseidon the earth-shaker' (he was associated with



earthquakes) or appearance: 'gray-eyed Athene'. The epithets describing mortals are perhaps more informative: 'thoughtful Telemachos' (though he shares 'godlike' with other characters, including Odysseus), 'haughty suitors', 'circumspect Penelope' and sometimes what is called a 'patronymic', 'X, son of Y' (e.g. 'Antinoös, son of Eupeithes', the leader of the suitors, 'Zeus, son of Kronos'). These regular 'noun + epithet' combinations seem to give a particular dramatic point, when used at a point of climax (e.g. 2.85: 'High-spoken intemperate Telemachos' – this by Antinous when Telemachus has dared to assert himself in the heat of the debate in Book 2 and repeated in a failed attempt at jocularly at 2.303). Epithets are also used of things, for example, 'winged words', 'balanced ships'. You probably did not get all of these, but the more you read the more you will find; they are far too numerous to list here.

More prominent are lines which have been given the (rather unpoetic!) name of 'formula'. Formulas are phrases of, for example, one line (like the formulas we saw above which indicate speech and reply). The poet usually does not strive for a new way to say something: for example, each time he wishes to start a new day he describes the dawn breaking thus: 'Now when the young Dawn showed again with her rosy fingers' (2.1, 3.404, 3.491, etc.) and night falling: 'And the sun set, and all the journeying ways were darkened' (2.388, 3.497). These seem particularly effective ('rosy-fingered dawn' has always been a particular favourite among people who know nothing else from Homer!). Lines relating to the stages of feasting are also common, for example, 'But when they had put away their desire for eating and drinking ...' (1.150, 3.67).

This last example takes us into the final and most prominent main category of repetition, which you could hardly have missed and which, more than anything else, gives Homer a particular character which distinguishes it from poetry with which you may be more familiar: what are called 'genre passages', in effect sequences of formulas, sequences which describe an activity that occurs frequently in the poet's story: receiving guests, eating and drinking, sacrificing to the gods. These are activities which are accompanied by ceremonial and tend to feature the same actions accompanied by the same words. Compare, for example, 1.136–42 (the preparation for the hospitality of a meal for the disguised Athena) with 4.52–8 (Telemachus' reception by the hero Menelaus). This is the same activity (preparation for a meal) and exactly the same words are used to describe it. Other passages have no exact repetition within the short span of the poem



we are reading here, but clearly come into the same category, for example, the extensive scenes of feasting and sacrifice which frame Nestor's reminiscences in Book 3 (31ff. and 386ff.)

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### Oral poetry

You might well ask why the poet composed in this way. Why not strive for variation and originality in descriptions of such activities? This brings us to a major issue, which we have time here only to summarise: oral composition.

Early in the twentieth century, an American Homeric scholar, Milman Parry (1902–35), produced a detailed analysis of Homer's language which demonstrated that the fixed repetitions (he was responsible for the term 'formulas') were designed to fit particularly well into the strict metre of the hexameter verse (the six-unit poetic metre in which all 25,000 or so verses of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are composed; this is covered in more detail in CD1). If, as Parry supposed, the Homeric poet was improvising his poem on the spot (as we supposed the Ithacan bard Phemius may have been doing) the repetitions would seem to be designed to 'help the verse along', to give the singer an opportunity to think out his story 'on the hoof', as it were. This was not just an inspired guess on Parry's part; he went further and demonstrated in considerable linguistic detail that such features as the noun + epithet combinations ('thoughtful Telemachos', 'gray-eyed Athene', etc.) formed vast 'systems' adjusted with great economy to the needs of the verse, a resource that the singer could call on in the split second he needed to create his lines. This would, in an experienced singer, be an almost unconscious process, leaving his mind free to map out the structure of the larger story. Parry claimed that the kind of system he had discovered would never have been created by a literate poet composing 'in the study', simply because he would have had no need of it; he would have had plenty of time to think out his lines. The repetitions, then, according to Parry, are not just an artistic ornament but a sheer necessity of composition.

This hypothesis, however, does not solve a problem we noted earlier. Granted that Homer may have had the intellectual and artistic capacity and the stamina to improvise a poem of the length of the *Odyssey*, on what occasion could he possibly have delivered it? And, more generally, how can we move from linguistic analysis to conjectures about the actual circumstances of performance?

This takes us to the second part of Parry's argument. From his work on the text of Homer, he was in the 1930s drawn to field work, recording Bosnian illiterate itinerant singers who entertained local audiences by improvising poems on traditional subjects, using many of the techniques



Parry had discovered in his analysis of Homer. Such poets based their techniques on what was obviously a long tradition of skilled verse-making, often descending from father to son through families and having as subjects folk-tales and national events such as wars and battles. (For one of the most famous of the Serbo-Croatian bards, see Figure 1.9.) Parry judged that there were enough similarities between Bosnian singers and Homer to lead to the assumption that Homer composed in a similar way, and given the difference between eighth-century BCE Greece and the early twentieth-century Balkans, under similar conditions.

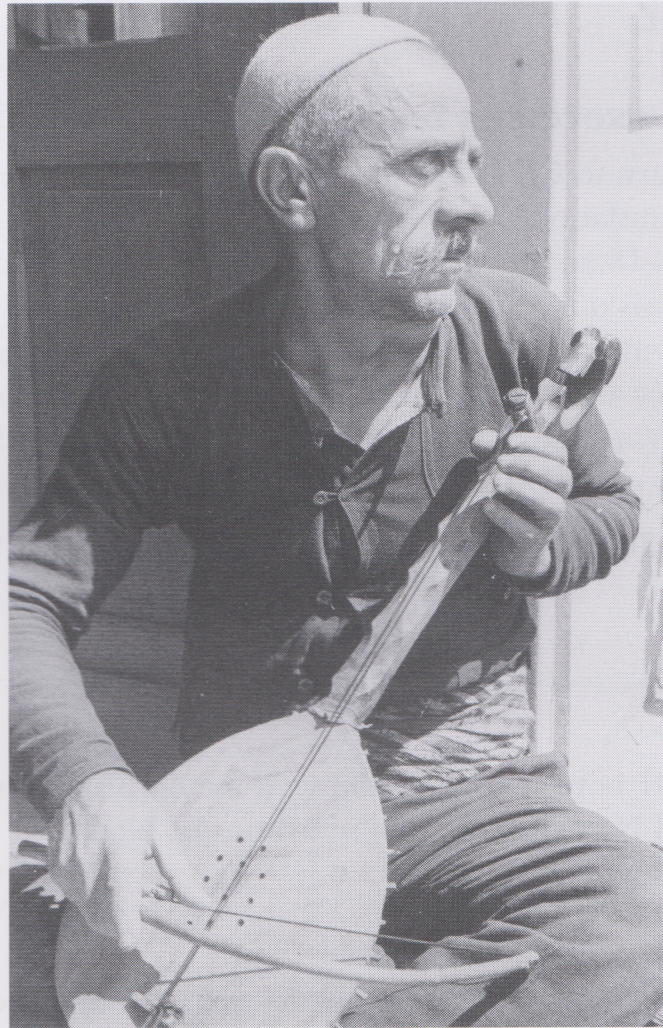


Figure 1.9 Bosnian *guslar* or oral heroic singer, with his single string violin (*gusle*), from the town of Bijelo Polje. Photograph courtesy of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature, Harvard University. Singers like this one were the object of the field researches of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the 1930s, and presented a striking modern parallel to the oral poetry of Homer.



The cogency of Parry's analysis has convinced most scholars in general; there is now little dispute that the Homeric poems *have their basis* in an oral poetic tradition. Much work has been done, both on further analysis of the Homeric text and, most importantly, on other modern oral traditions and the nature of oral composition. The question of how Homer's method of composition relates to oral poetry remains a live issue, which we do not have time to go into here. It is important, however, that you note the three features which we isolated above: noun + epithet combinations, line formulas and 'genre' passages. These are very common; if you still feel unsure about these, go back over this section before proceeding further.

### 2.3 Critical exercises leading up to TMA 01

For this section, turn to CD1, Tracks 1–30, 'Reading the Homeric texts' and 'Homer in translation'. You will also need the *Odyssey* and Audio-Visual Notes 1. Tracks 1–18 are devoted to introducing you to the skills of close reading and analysis of several passages of the *Odyssey*; they are also concerned with some general principles of approach to text analysis. Tracks 19–30 will consider aspects of translation, looking at a number of different versions of the *Odyssey* 1.1–5. Following these tracks there will be a practice exercise for you to do before you attempt TMA 01.



#### CD1, Tracks 1–30, 'Reading the Homeric texts' and 'Homer in translation'

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#### Exercise

Listen to CD1 now in conjunction with the corresponding notes in Audio-Visual Notes 1, and then return to the block.

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#### Student activity: critical exercise

Having listened to CD1, you should now be getting familiar with some of the detailed and general aspects of Homer's verbal art, as well as how to go about doing a critical analysis of some given short pieces (and you may have attempted some of the other pieces suggested in the Audio-Visual Notes, in either a tutorial or a self-help group). It is now your turn to have a go at this type of exercise.

In the first part of the CD, although obviously the type of pieces I chose varied a lot (this was deliberate), in each case I tended to adhere to a standard three-stage approach:



- 1 Identify the passage (where it is in the *Odyssey* narrative) and say what type of piece it is (narrative, description, speech or a mix of these).
- 2 Say *what* it tells us about the storyline and characters and *how* it tells us (how poetic details enable a mood to be created, distinctive aspects of characters revealed, etc.).
- 3 Say what general conclusions we can draw about Homer's art and how the piece may relate to broader themes in the poem.

I would like you now to try an exercise like this yourself. It is taken from a part of the poem which you have not been asked to read so far: Book 6.127–48; you should, however, be able to recognise elements in the verse which are familiar from earlier study. The word limits for each section are approximate, but they are there to help you focus clearly on the essential points you need to make, and not waste words. You can see that the bulk of your detailed work should go under the second point. Do not exceed the final total if you can help it and read my analysis only when you have attempted the exercise.

In order to put this passage into its internal context (i.e. where it comes in the narrative), the first stage of the procedure, you are advised to read quickly Book 6.1–126 (pp.102–5) to get the general context. (Odysseus has escaped, exhausted, from a storm and is sleeping on the shore of Scheria. Nausicaa (usually pronounced 'Nawsikaya'), the daughter of the king of the Phaeacians (Phaiakians), who inhabit the place, is washing clothes in Odysseus' vicinity; a ball-game wakes Odysseus up. For an illustration of this scene, see Figure 1.10.)

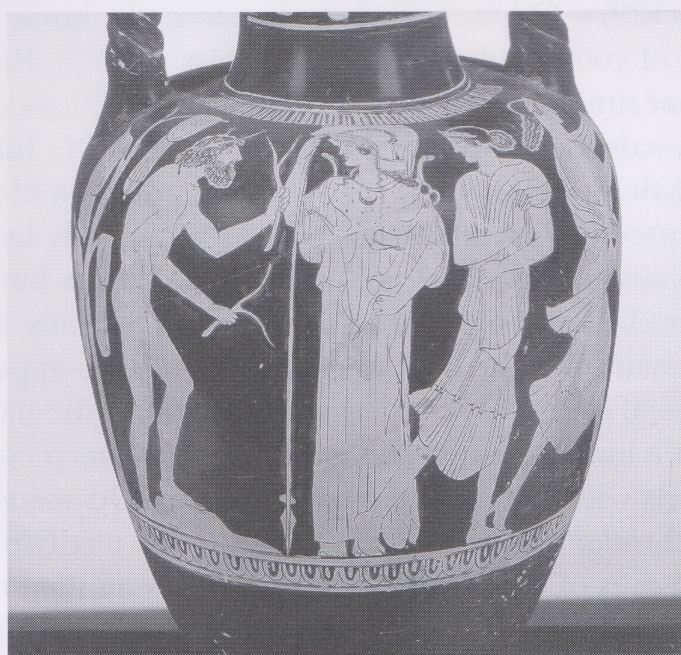


Figure 1.10 Athenian Red-figure amphora. By the Nausicaa Painter from Vulci. Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek, Munich 2322 (ARV 1107.2), depicting the scene in the *Odyssey*, 6.127ff. Photo: Christa Koppermann.



**Exercise**

Read the *Odyssey* 6.127–48 (pp.105–6). Then, in no more than 500 words and using the three-stage procedure detailed above:

- 1 Put the passage briefly in its context, saying what type of passage it is (50–100 words).
- 2 Pick out significant details of style and composition (words, phrases or larger elements) which you think contribute to the presentation (300 words).
- 3 Briefly consider the overall effect of the passage, with any general points about style and theme (100–150 words).

**Discussion**

- 1 The passage is entirely narrative, between two speeches: in the first, Odysseus communes with himself; in the second he addresses Nausicaa. The narrative is highly dramatic, with the appearance and actions of the two main focuses of interest, Odysseus and the girls, vividly presented. Nausicaa is singled out at 139 as braver than the rest; the poet is also signalling her as an important character whose position as 'the daughter of Alkinoös' (Alcinous, the king), may be vital in securing Odysseus' safety.
- 2 Starting at the beginning: Odysseus' status and size are emphasised (127: 'great', 128: 'heavy hand'), but the heroic image is undercut by the next line (129) – Odysseus feels he has to make himself decent in the company of young ladies! A simile follows (130–5). Remember from CD1 that similes are always distinguished by introductory and concluding words such as 'like', 'as' or 'So ...'. A wild ('hill-kept') lion chasing cattle or sheep for food is a common image in Homer to illustrate the predatory warrior. Here it works not only by comic contrast (Odysseus' opponents are not fellow warriors but young girls) but also by similarity of situation: despite the apparently humorous context, Odysseus, like the lion, is desperate, and his appearance – vividly described in 137 as 'crusted with dry spray' (he has just escaped from a long period in the sea) – forms a sharp contrast with the 'young girls with well-ordered hair' (135–6). Odysseus' appearance is presented through the girls' eyes ('he appeared terrifying to them'). In the second part of the passage (139) we are reminded of the divine dimension: the goddess Athena is helping Odysseus by making the princess unexpectedly brave (and so indirectly aiding him). Odysseus is now faced with a nice social dilemma which has both comic and



serious implications. Supplication (142) involved physically clasping a person's knees, a gesture whereby a person put him- or herself under the protection of another, but here there is a problem: could a middle-aged man of frightening appearance risk physically touching a 'well-favoured girl' (142)? The last few lines emphasise Odysseus' presence of mind and 'craft' (148), which we learned about from the first line of the poem ('the man of many ways'). He wisely chooses a verbal rather than a physical approach, the subtlety of which (the following speech) is foreshadowed in 148 ('blandishingly and full of craft').

- 3 Book 6 as a whole significantly changes the tone of the poem from the shipwreck of Book 5; the innocence and beauty of the young girls, evident earlier in the book, is in this passage sharply contrasted with Odysseus, whose external appearance belies his vulnerable state. There is an element of mock horror in the description, but the simile betrays, amid the humour, the urgency of the situation: this is a turning point for the hero and he has to use his fabled presence of mind to ensure safety. The poet effectively combines comic and serious elements to present this transitional point.

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You should now turn to the Assignment Book and complete TMA 01, which is a short critical exercise similar to the one we've just done. Then return to this block.



## Part 3 Homeric society and its values

### 3.1 Introduction

So far we have mostly concentrated on the origins and artistic qualities of the poems and the way they are constructed. In this section of the block, the focus of the study is going to be the content of the poems, especially the social structure and moral values that underlie the stories in them. You will read part of the *Iliad*, Homer's other epic poem, to go alongside those parts of the *Odyssey* you have already met. Although we can never know whether or not such a world as described in Homer actually existed, the Greeks in later ages believed that it had existed long ago and were greatly influenced by Homeric moral values. Therefore it is useful to those of us who wish to understand the Classical world to learn what sort of value system Homer bequeathed to the later ages, to both Greeks and Romans.

### 3.2 Heroes and people

Within the framework of the plot of each of the Homeric epics, we can infer a number of underlying customs, rules and values against which the characters judge and measure their own and each other's behaviour. It is from such observations that we can attempt to reconstruct the hypothetical 'Homeric world' and its social codes. For example, in Parts 1 and 2 of this block we have already seen a Homeric community in action in the *Odyssey*. In what sort of society do you imagine the tale is set?

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#### Exercise

Before you read on, think for a moment what 'clues' you can pick out about the social organisation and conventions of the society in the story you have read so far.

#### Discussion

I think the earlier books of the *Odyssey* provide us with some helpful clues. You may have noticed such social conventions as households which contain not only the family members but also servants or slaves (e.g. 1.136: maidservant; 139: housekeeper; 141: carver; 143: herald). There are different roles for men and women (e.g. Telemachus' words to Penelope at 1.356–9, assigning spinning and weaving to women and discussion to men). We also learn about hospitality to visitors (e.g. Telemachus welcomed as a guest at Nestor's and Menelaus' palaces in Books 2 and 3). There are gods whose actions affect human beings, so



religious rituals – sacrifices most prominently – are important (e.g. 3.40–50, where Nestor invites the guests to the sacrifice).

Perhaps more central to the plot is the fact that both people and the gods talk about Odysseus as a good king (e.g. 2.230–34, by Mentor; 5.8–12, by Athena), so there seems to be a sort of kingdom in Ithaca. The Greek word for ‘king’ is *basileus*, which is applied both to Odysseus and to other noblemen coming to court Penelope, but Odysseus seems to have the highest authority among all the kings and princes on Ithaca. There are Assembly scenes (e.g. in Book 2), so there seems to be the custom of people getting together to discuss matters of importance to the community. But how was it run? Telemachus summons the meeting, which may imply that he is the leader of the community as the king’s son. But the very existence of such an Assembly and the heated exchange of words between Telemachus and the suitors seem to indicate that the ‘leader’ does not have absolute rule over the rest of the community. The fact that certain men are eligible to marry the widow of the former king and inherit the kingship also sheds some light on the way the society is organised.

It looks as if under normal circumstances there would be a king to maintain order in the community, but his ‘heir’ does not necessarily have total control over the behaviour of other members of the community. Someone else can become the sole king, if he can marry Penelope. Even Odysseus has to fight for his former position on his arrival back home. So if he is a ‘king’ his kingship is far from secure and absolute, but depends on his ability to defend it from pretenders. Let’s now look at some of the main features of Homeric society in more detail.

### 3.3 Some features of Homeric society

#### Hospitality

One of the underlying principles of Homeric society that can be observed from the Homeric poems is the custom of *xenia* (‘hospitality’: *xeiniē* in Homer’s Greek). As you have already seen, the *Odyssey* especially has a variety of situations in which hospitality is offered and this can take a number of forms. At the bottom end, anyone has to provide at least bare necessities for visitors. So when Odysseus is washed up naked on the shore of Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians, the first person who encounters him, Princess Nausicaa, is obliged to offer him the essentials for his survival: food, drink and clothing (6.191–228). Odysseus happens to be a king in his



own land and his host is a princess in her land, but the obligation to look after visitors is the same for any host, even of much humbler means, and even if the visitors are of much humbler status. As Nausicaa herself says:

... since this is some poor wanderer who has come to us,  
we must now take care of him, since all strangers and wanderers  
are sacred in the sight of Zeus ...

(*Odyssey* 6.206–208)

A much humbler host, such as the swineherd Eumaeus, also kindly receives Odysseus when he finally comes back to Ithaca disguised as a beggar, following the same rule (14.56–71). It is the divine sanction that protects strangers in foreign lands, and ensures them the safe passage and hospitality necessary for their survival. What is notable is the fact that, on these particular occasions, the hosts are not expecting anything in return for their hospitality from the seemingly destitute visitor, but they can expect retaliation from Zeus if they dishonour him. The god is seen as a patron of visitors and the enforcer of the code of *xenia*.

Although those unable to return hospitality are not expected to do so, those who possess the means have the duty to reciprocate. Once home, Menelaus is very aware of his duty to offer hospitality to others, after many years away from home living on that of other people. I would like to return to a scene we first met in CD1, Tracks 2–3, when Menelaus' henchman Eteoneus asks him whether he should let the two strangers into the joint wedding feast of Menelaus' children (inadvertently 'gate-crashing', in effect) or direct them to another household. Menelaus reprimands him saying:

Eteoneus, son of Boëthoös, you were never  
a fool before, but now you are babbling nonsense, as a child  
would do. Surely we two have eaten much hospitality  
from other men before we came back here. May Zeus only  
make an end of such misery hereafter. Unharness  
the strangers' horses then, and bring the men here to be feasted.

(*Odyssey* 4.31–36)

His wish 'May Zeus ...' seems to imply that the god can change his fortune again if he offends him as the god of hospitality. His sentiment mixes the purely human sense of reciprocity – that he should offer hospitality as he was offered it by others before – with that of the religious duty that visitors should be looked after, as they are under the god's protection.

As we see in Books 3 and 4, heroes entertain each other in grand style. Large animals are sacrificed for feasts; bread and other accompaniments are served as well as wine. The guests are offered a bath, accommodation, valuable parting gifts and sometimes even conveyance home.



Once a guest is received by a host as *xenos*, a bond is formed between them for good. The word *xenos* can mean both 'guest' and 'host', which reflects the reciprocity of their relationship. Not only do they become friends (*xenoi*) for life, but their children, grandchildren and all their descendants inherit the relationship (*xenia*, often translated as 'guest-friendship'). This bond will guarantee both parties hospitality in each other's household. The words of Nestor, who is eager to do the best in his duty towards his friend, illustrate this convention very clearly:

No, no, in my house the dear son of Odysseus shall not  
have to go to sleep on the deck of a ship, as long as  
I am alive, and my sons after me are left in my palace  
to entertain our guests, whoever comes to my household.

(*Odyssey* 3.352–35)

The hereditary nature of *xenia* is also famously illustrated in an episode in Book 6 of Homer's other epic, the *Iliad*, some of which you will study shortly. In the *Iliad* 6.119–236 Diomedes, Tydeus' son, one of the prominent Greek warriors, encounters Glaucus, a Trojan ally from Lycia, in the middle of a battle. They tell each other who they are and who their ancestors are in preparation for their combat, so that they know who they are taking on, but then it transpires that their grandfathers had the tie of *xenia*. Having realised this, Diomedes says to Glaucus:

See now, you are my guest friend from far in the time of our fathers.  
Brilliant Oineus once was host to Bellerophontes  
the blameless, in his halls, and twenty days he detained him,  
and these two gave to each other fine gifts in token of friendship.  
Oineus gave his guest a war belt bright with the red dye,  
Bellerophontes a golden and double-handled drinking-cup,  
a thing I left behind in my house when I came on my journey.  
Tydeus, though, I cannot remember, since I was little  
when he left me, that time the people of the Achaeans perished  
in Thebe. Therefore I am your friend and host in the heart of Argos;  
you are mine in Lykia, when I come to your country.  
Let us avoid each other's spears, even in the close fighting.  
There are plenty of Trojans and famed companions in battle for me  
to kill, whom the god sends me, or those I run down with my swift  
feet,  
many Achaeans for you to slaughter, if you can do it.  
But let us exchange our armour, so that these others may know  
how we claim to be guests and friends from the days of our fathers.

(*Iliad* 6.215–31)



So they exchange their armour and part as friends. The token thus given or exchanged becomes a family heirloom which is important as one's proof of identity when claiming one's tie with the other party concerned. As the passage above illustrates, this tie not only outlives generations but also overrides other social alliances, even when your community is at war with your guest-friend's. This independence of individual relationships as something divinely sanctioned and lasting longer than any temporary national interest has a profound influence in Greek society, not only visible in Homeric poems, but also in later classical literature and in real life in Greek history. Later Greek imagination also depicted a number of scenes of heroic friendship in visual art which did not have direct references to Homeric texts, but reflected how the later Greeks interpreted the way heroes behaved towards their friends (see Figure 1.11).

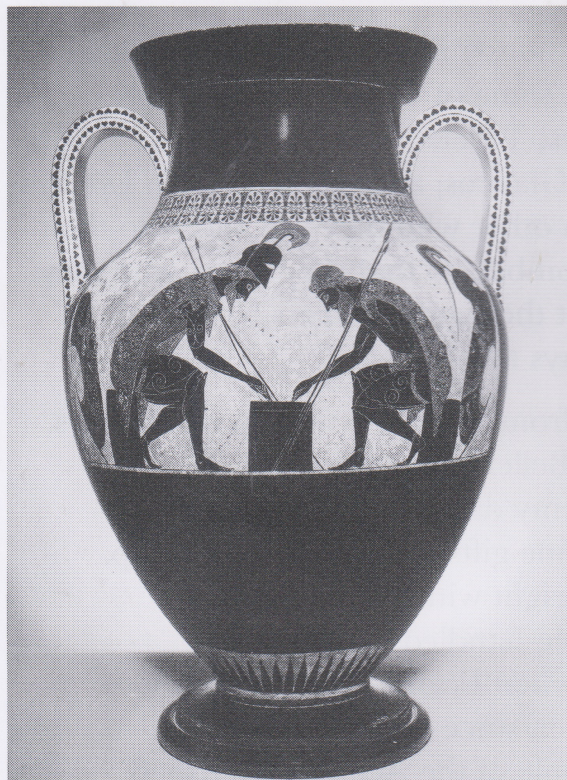


Figure 1.11 Vase painting, which has preserved some scenes from the Trojan story for which there is no surviving literary authority. Here, Achilles and Ajax play a board game. Athenian Black-figure belly amphora by Exekias from Vulci. Vatican Museums 344 (ABV 145.13). Reproduced by permission of Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie.

### The offenders

Strong and sacred though such bonds might be, things do turn sour and can have serious consequences if the rules of hospitality are violated. The main subjects of the two Homeric epics are two good examples (i.e. the abduction of Helen by Paris and the abuse of hospitality by the suitors of Penelope). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is driven to kill the suitors mainly because of their violation of the code of *xenia*. They not only outstay their welcome by a few years, eating away the property of the household and abusing the servants, but also abuse the visitors to the house, denying the hospitality due to them. The great irony of this epic is that the 'guest' who



is most ill-treated and wronged by the suitors (who effectively have taken over the household and behave as if they are the lords of the house) is Odysseus himself (disguised as a beggar). Their behaviour as 'bad hosts' is also illustrated by many other examples such as when Athena, disguised as Mentès, one of the family's guest-friends, first comes to the house (Book 1) and when Telemachus brings Theoclymenus, a wandering prophet, to his house (Book 15). On both occasions Telemachus proves a good host, in contrast with the suitors. Their failure to respect visitors and the code of hospitality is very much seen as the reason for their downfall, and their wrongdoing brings divine anger down upon themselves.

Another major example of what happens when *xenia* is violated is the subject of the entire epic cycle – the Trojan War, started because Paris, the Trojan prince, betrayed the hospitality of Menelaus, king of Sparta, by running off with his wife Helen and taking away some of his treasures. This is not simply a violation of *xenia*, but also a direct insult to Menelaus and his family, which makes it inevitable for him and his brother Agamemnon to launch an expedition to recover Helen and the treasures along with suitable compensation. If this is not forthcoming, the expedition will aim for the total destruction of the city of Troy. Let us now look at the world of the *Iliad*.

### 3.4 Society and values in the *Iliad*

We began our study of Homer with his epic poem the *Odyssey*; we now turn to the epic also attributed to Homer on the theme of the Trojan War, the *Iliad*. Like the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* is also conventionally divided into 24 books. While the *Odyssey* depicts the struggle of its hero Odysseus to get back home after the war at Troy, the *Iliad* depicts events during the war in its final year up to just before the fall of Troy. Because the *Iliad* shows the interaction of heroes with each other more extensively than does the *Odyssey*, it provides further insight into the heroic society that Homer depicted.

#### **The *Iliad*: a brief synopsis**

In terms of the chronology within the Trojan legends, the tale of the *Iliad* comes before that of the *Odyssey*. In fact Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey*, features prominently in the *Iliad* as one of the main characters and it is possible that some elements in the *Odyssey* are echoes from the *Iliad*. The latter takes the tale of the Trojan War in its last year, just before its conclusion, at the point when a bitter quarrel breaks out between the two most prominent members of the Greek army, namely Agamemnon, leader of the Greek expedition against Troy, and Achilles, the mightiest warrior in the Greek camp, whose valour the whole army heavily depends on.



The quarrel leads to Achilles' withdrawal from battle, which results in a major setback for the Greeks in their siege of Troy. Their fortune does not turn for the better until Achilles returns to battle in Book 18, now eager to avenge his friend Patroclus' death at the hand of Hector, the champion of the Trojans. Achilles manages to avenge Patroclus by killing Hector, despite knowing that it is destined that his own death is to follow shortly after Hector's. The poem ends with a moving episode in which Hector's father, King Priam, comes to ransom his son's body from Achilles in Book 24. Although they are enemies, the two share a brief moment of mutual understanding, with Achilles identifying the old man's grief with that of his own aged father back home. At the same time Achilles anticipates his own imminent death, which was sealed by that of Hector.

### **Tension in heroism**

Unlike the *Odyssey*, which is set after the conclusion of the Trojan War, the *Iliad* depicts more direct actions on the battlefield. Even Nestor and Menelaus, whom we meet in the *Odyssey* as generous and sympathetic men, appear to have no qualms about the bloody side of the business of war in the *Iliad*. As we can gather from what others say of Odysseus before he set sail for Troy, in peacetime the king is supposed to be a benign, father-like figure who looks after his people (*Odyssey* 2.230–4, 5.8–12). In return, he commands his people's respect, in addition to some substantial financial gain. However, those men, who can be called aristocrats or heroes, are not content with their quiet country life. Their *raison d'être* consists first and foremost in being warriors, going to war and winning everlasting glory. Their wealth also partly comes from the spoils of war, relying on their looting on battlefields. The benign father-like king has to be transformed into a ruthless killer and unscrupulous treasure hunter on the battlefield, as we see in various episodes in both Homeric epics. This tension within the personality of the Homeric hero is ever present and can surface in a violent way from time to time even in a circle of friends and allies. The anger of Achilles, the main theme of the *Iliad*, may be seen as one such example.

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### **Exercise**

Turn to Reading 1.1, the text of the *Iliad* Book 1, and read lines 1–307, the episode detailing the furious quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. While reading, try to work out:

- what the quarrel is about;
- how it arose.





## Discussion

The opening episodes of the *Iliad* illustrate the importance of honour (*timē*) in the Homeric world by depicting what happens when someone is dishonoured. First Agamemnon dishonours the god Apollo by refusing his priest Chryses' request to ransom his daughter Chryseis, who has been his war-prize, from him (26–32). In retaliation the god sends the plague on the Greeks. This hits the whole army despite the fact that the fault was really with Agamemnon as leader and not the others, who were in favour of granting the priest's request (43–52). The devastating plague does not stop until the original request (i.e. the return of Chryses' daughter) is met, and the god has been paid suitable compensation in the form of a hecatomb, a large-scale animal sacrifice. The episode also highlights the fact that the gods appear to share the same sense of honour as human beings, and can take revenge just as human beings might wish to do when they are dishonoured.

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This episode triggers the main theme of the epic, namely the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. Because Agamemnon is unhappy about having to return Chryseis, his prize of honour, he tactlessly threatens to compensate himself by taking another man's prize woman, naming Achilles among three potential victims for this loss. Achilles reacts angrily to this insult and, after heated exchanges and having only just contained his impulse to kill Agamemnon, he withdraws from the battle. In this incident the great king, who should normally be an arbiter for any dispute among his followers and allies, is an offender himself, thinking only of his own honour and profit. This is clearly an unusual situation which brings about the unusually devastating consequences that are announced at the start of the poem.

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## Exercise

Now read the rest of the *Iliad*, Book 1 (308–611). While reading, consider how the human and divine dimensions of the scene interact and take forward the dispute. (This will be discussed in the following section.)

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## The principle of reciprocity

'An eye for an eye' is a widespread principle of justice in the ancient world which applies to the Homeric world, too. If you are hurt by others you are



expected to retaliate, whether the damage is to your property, to your own person or to your honour, for if you do not you will lose your honour in others' eyes. The same obligation applies if the injured party is a member of your household, or one of those under your command if you are a military leader. This is the background against which Odysseus takes revenge on his wife's suitors on his return home in the *Odyssey* and the suitors' family members try to avenge their deaths in return. You are done to as you do to others – this principle of reciprocity operates throughout Homeric society.

In the opening episodes of the *Iliad*, the two parties wronged by Agamemnon – namely Chryses and Achilles – are not in a position to take direct action against him in retaliation. In Chryses' case, this is because he is too old and physically weak to take on the might of the king and his army, and in that of Achilles it is because he receives advice from the goddess Athena not to retaliate by force. Instead they are both successful in invoking divine help to inflict damage on Agamemnon through harming his army in order to make him realise his mistakes (*Iliad* 1.36–42, 393–412). Here, too, we see the principle of reciprocity in action as an avenging force.

On the other hand, another positive side of reciprocity is visible in the same episodes. Chryses can enlist the god Apollo's help in punishing Agamemnon by reminding him of the past favours he did for the god (*Iliad* 1.39–41). Achilles enlists Zeus' assistance in his retaliation against Agamemnon by asking his mother Thetis to remind him of the favour she did him long ago (*Iliad* 1.394–407). The fact that both pleas are successful highlights the importance of reciprocity (the obligation to return favours) which evidently applies even to the gods, who are superior to human beings and, should they so wish, could easily ignore their pleas with impunity. Whether divine or mortal, you are expected to return good for good just as much as harm for harm.

The wrongs done can result in devastating retaliation, but can sometimes be redressed by material compensation. We see a clear example in the Chryses episode in which the Greeks are able to appease Apollo by returning the priest's daughter as initially requested as well as giving offerings to the god. Similarly Achilles, too, will eventually receive compensation (as promised by Athena), though not on the first occasion it is offered to him.

Another thing to note in the opening episodes of the *Iliad* is that the idea of honour (*timē*) is closely associated with possession of material properties (including human slaves) which embody it. Among the heroes there appears to be a close equation between honour (e.g. 159) and the possession of a 'prize' (185). No matter how much he is verbally praised or flattered by others as the most powerful of the kings, Agamemnon would



still feel the sting of losing his 'trophy' Chryseis. The loss of his 'honour' is visible and seems unacceptable to him. Achilles' reaction to Agamemnon's removal of his prize, Briseis, is much the same, except that in his case the sense of outrage and injustice is added to the calculation of loss and gain. In the Homeric world, the glory of the heroes does not merely consist of respect and admiration from others, but also of material manifestation of such respect, such as the share of the spoils of war, the share of meat and wine at communal meals and other gifts. Odysseus' revenge on Penelope's suitors in the *Odyssey* also needs to be interpreted against this background.

### **Virtue (*aretē*) and honour (*timē*)**

One of the best ways of finding out what is normal and acceptable behaviour in a society is to observe its opposite in incidents in which something has gone 'wrong'. By now we have seen a number of situations in which Homeric characters are criticised or even attacked for their wrongdoing, most notably for violating the rule of hospitality or taking away other people's property (e.g. the suitors' neglect of *xenia* at Odysseus' house and Agamemnon's taking of Briseis from Achilles). These situations give us some idea of the code of behaviour expected of Homeric heroes; we shall concentrate more specifically in this section on the qualities expected. We return to the *Iliad*, Book 1, this time to Nestor's speech at 254–84. By now Agamemnon has openly declared his intention to take Achilles' prize woman in place of his, who is soon to be returned to Chryses. Achilles' impulse to attack Agamemnon has been checked by Athena's intervention, and following her advice Achilles has showered Agamemnon with verbal abuse instead of attacking him with a real weapon.



### **Exercise**

To give you the context of the speech and the profile of Nestor, reread Book 1.245–84. What evidence can we gather from this passage about:

- 1 the character of Nestor?
- 2 the attributes and qualities expected of heroes?

### **Discussion**

I expect that you will have picked out a few items under both headings. What was your first impression of this speech? I cannot help feeling that it is rather long, rambling and not exactly to the point, if the point was to persuade the two quarrelling parties to be reconciled with each other. Do you also get that impression? (You may have memories of Nestor's long and rambling speeches to Telemachus in



the *Odyssey*, Book 3.) Is his speech more or less effective because of the roundabout way Nestor puts it? Does his long bragging narrative on his past experience and achievements add much force to his persuasion?

Commentators have often identified Nestor's manner of speech as a characteristic of an old man and as such an appropriate part of Homer's characterisation of Nestor as the elder par excellence. However, I do not feel that this attribute necessarily diminishes Nestor's authority in any way. He comes across as a 'fair-spoken', 'lucid' speaker (248) and the fact that the poet makes a point of emphasising his amazing old age (250–2) suggests that it would not have been regarded by his fellow heroes as a negative characteristic. Nestor speaks with great authority, reprimanding all the Achaeans forcefully and even directly criticising the quarrelling leaders. He appears to expect a degree of respect by virtue of his old age (259; see also Telemachus in awe of him in the *Odyssey* 3.24).

The logic Nestor uses in addition, however, needs further attention. He emphasises the valour of those heroes of olden days who used to respect and listen to him as well as his own valour and achievement as a warrior (271–2). This may indicate certain assumptions about heroic qualities: physical valour is something even the old Nestor has to demonstrate (albeit in his reminiscence) to command any respect and attention from other heroes, past and present.

Apart from his slightly boasting digression, Nestor appears very diplomatic in his speech, echoing the author's description of his words 'sweeter than honey' (249). He publicly acknowledges the prominent attributes in which the two heroes excel. First of all he addresses both as surpassing all the others in counsel and valour (258); for Agamemnon the great honour given by Zeus (278–9) and his power over many men (281) and for Achilles his superiority in physical strength and his divine parentage (277, 280, 284).

So by looking at the qualities attributed to Nestor, Agamemnon and Achilles in this passage, I would count the following as the most prominent characteristics of Homeric heroes: physical valour, power over other men, divine support and connection, honour given by others and the ability to give good counsel. You may have identified other qualities in this and other passages, too.

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Nestor describes Agamemnon as a 'great man' (*Iliad* 1.275). This phrase translates the Greek word *agathos*, which literally means 'good' or 'good



man'. This in fact is the word most commonly used to denote a man of heroic status with property, political power and above all military valour. In this sense all three men (Agamemnon, Achilles and Nestor) belong to the class of *agathoi* (the plural form of *agathos*) with their respective excellence and prestige. However, it is also important to note that, despite his best efforts and good intentions (253), Nestor fails to persuade either of the quarrelling men. Agamemnon does acknowledge that Nestor's speech was 'fair and orderly' (286), but refuses actually to follow his good advice, as does Achilles. The two are now locked in the contest of power and pride in which all that seems to matter is for them to decide which of them is the better and stronger of the Achaeans, the true 'great man'. In distinguishing them, Nestor, talking to Achilles, makes the specific point:

though you are the stronger man, and the mother who bore you was immortal,  
yet is this man [Agamemnon] greater who is lord over more than you rule.

(*Iliad* 1.280–81)

### 3.5 The later books of the *Iliad*

In this section, you will look at some passages from the last books of the *Iliad* to follow the tale of the anger of Achilles to its conclusion, as well as to observe further examples of heroic behaviour and the values underlying them. You do not need to read through these books in their entirety, but you should try to read the passages cited in the following discussions in addition to those you are specifically instructed to read.

#### The story so far

For a while the battles go well for the Greeks, but eventually, as Achilles has requested, Zeus allows the Trojans to gain the upper hand. Given the serious situation, Agamemnon has been persuaded by the others to send an embassy to Achilles to offer to return Briseis and to give many gifts as compensation in return for his rejoining the war effort. Achilles, however, seeing through the smooth messages conveyed by the embassy that Agamemnon has not really changed his haughty attitude towards him, flatly refuses to receive the gifts and return to battle. The Achaeans, now even more hard-pressed, have no choice but to carry on defending themselves without Achilles' protection.

The Trojans begin setting fire to the Greek ships, without which the Greeks can never go home. Achilles allows himself to be persuaded by Patroclus, his best friend, to give a helping hand to the Greek army, to save them from total ruin. Still angry at Agamemnon, Achilles is not prepared to



go into battle in person, but he lends Patroclus his armour to wear and allows him to join the battle with his fresh force of Myrmidons. The relief mission is successful, partly because of Achilles' armour which Patroclus is wearing; this causes the Trojans to mistake him for Achilles and strikes terror and panic into them.

However, carried away by this success, Patroclus pursues the enemy right up to the walls of Troy where he is killed by Hector, the champion of the Trojans, with the help of the god Apollo. At this, Achilles' anger at Agamemnon loses its meaning and is now turned against Hector. To Achilles this means the loss of a beloved friend and member of his household and his henchman, on whose behalf he has a moral duty, as well as an emotional need, to take vengeance. He is finally reconciled with Agamemnon and receives his recompense, but now not so much for his injured honour but more so that he can go back to the battle to hunt down Hector.

Achilles' tale of revenge begins with his ruthless slaughter of enemy soldiers on the battlefield (Books 20–21) and finally he faces the man most wanted – Hector – in Book 22.

### **Achilles' resolve**

By the time he rejoins the battle, Achilles is a man resolved to die in order to avenge his friend. When he is told by his mother that his own death will soon follow Hector's, he replies:

I must die soon, then; since I was not to stand by my companion when he was killed. And now, far away from the land of his fathers, he has perished, and lacked my fighting strength to defend him. Now, since I am not going back to the beloved land of my fathers, since I was no light of safety to Patroklos nor to my other companions, who in their numbers went down before glorious Hektor, but sit here beside my ships, a useless weight on the good land, I, who am such as no other of the bronze-armoured Achaians in battle, though there are others also better in council ...

(*Iliad*. 18.98–106)

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### **Exercise**

Pause for a moment, read the passage again if necessary, and identify the logic and assumptions behind Achilles' wish to die rather than to go home alive.



### Discussion

I am not sure if I am completely following the logic of his argument, but the main thrust of what Achilles is determined to do must be clear enough. He was not there to defend his friends when they needed him – presumably including even those Achaeans whom earlier in the poem he asked Zeus to destroy in order to punish Agamemnon – so he feels he has failed in his duty as their protector. Therefore he deserves to die. Here, I for one detect an almost suicidal wish which goes beyond Achilles' desire to avenge his friend. It is as if he is punishing himself for failing to protect Patroclus.

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### Achilles versus Hector (*Iliad*, Book 22)

So Achilles advances towards the wall of Troy, leaving masses of casualties in his trail. Panicked Trojans pour into their fortified city, seeking refuge from the pursuing Greeks headed by Achilles. But Hector alone remains outside. His parents plead with him to seek shelter inside the city and not to face Achilles – knowing that this will almost certainly spell his death. Hector however does not listen – nor is he completely unwavering in his resolve to face Achilles.

You will find Book 22 in Reading 1.3 of Readings Book 1.

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### Exercise

The words Hector speaks to himself while waiting for Achilles (22.90–110) are a poignant insight into the psychology of a heroic mind. I would like you to read and reflect on this passage now, applying the knowledge you have obtained so far about what values matter to Homeric heroes. While reading, you might like to ask yourself the following questions, but they are only suggestions; the purpose of this activity is to give you an opportunity to develop your skills in close reading and analysing a passage from a work of literature. If your personal circumstances allow, you may wish to discuss your notes with your tutor or fellow students.

- 1 How does the poet describe Hector while he is waiting outside the city wall (90–7)? How effective is the simile in describing his state of mind?
- 2 What heroic values affect Hector's decision so far (up to line 110)?



### Exercise

Now read the rest of Hector's speech (22.111–30). Both Achilles and Hector anticipate their deaths as they head for their encounter. What are the similarities and differences in their motives and expectations?

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### Duties of family and friends

The following observations may help you in considering your approach to the above questions. I do not tackle Hector's dilemma (above) directly but the issues discussed here are relevant to it.

You will have become aware of the importance of the concept of duty. Duties to one's family members, friends and comrades are also recurring themes in the Homeric poems. For example, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has to protect his family and household against the plotting suitors. Poseidon relentlessly persecutes Odysseus on his voyage home because his son Polyphemus was blinded by him and Polyphemus appealed to Poseidon as his father to take revenge (Book 9). In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon leads the expedition against Troy for his love and obligation towards his brother whose wife, Helen, was abducted by the Trojan prince, Paris. Whether you are rich or poor, divine or human, the obligation to protect your household and family members is the same.

The Greek word for home or household is *oikos*, which you may come across in some books about ancient Greece. It typically contains not only one's immediate family members but also servants or slaves, and may also contain other dependants under your protection, such as Patroclus in Achilles' household, who came as an exile (*Iliad*. 23.89–90). *Oikos* is what defines your status and identity. The centrality of home is memorably demonstrated by Odysseus' struggle to get home; he even rejects immortality, which was offered to him by both Calypso and Circe if he agreed to become their husband. Instead he chooses to go home, just to see his country and his family again. Home is what makes us who we are.

Next in closeness are one's friends and companions. Some friends originally come from outside your household as guests (*xenoi*) but may become members of your household, as in the case of Patroclus in the house of Peleus, Achilles' father. Others who live outside one's home may be related by blood or marriage, as in the case of Odysseus and Eurylochos who is married to his sister, or Achilles and Ajax who are cousins. Bonds between such friends are strengthened by sharing religious rituals including sacrificial meals and fighting together against the enemy, either to defend themselves or to raid other communities for profit. When a person dies, it falls to the family of the deceased to provide him or her with funerary rites, the women being especially charged with prominent roles such as the cleansing and anointing of the body to prepare for the funeral and ritual wailing as part of formal mourning.

If family members are not close by (for example, on the occasion of military campaigns such as the Trojan War), then those obligations fall on the soldier's comrades, especially his leader. The importance of the family's



and friends' duty towards the dead is a recurring theme in Greek society, often problematised by later tragedians and historians.

### **Patroclus' funeral games (*Iliad*, Book 23: synopsis and discussion)**



Placed in the context of family obligations, it becomes easier to understand the implications of Achilles' hosting of the funeral games in Patroclus' honour, as his leader, comrade-in-arms, friend and head of the household all at the same time. The episode reveals to us a new side of Achilles. Unlike the hot-headed hero whose temper caused so much devastation to his army in Book 1, he is now seen to play the role of head of the household, mediating between quarrelling parties (23.488–98), generously giving out prizes and presents even to those who lost the games by misfortune (534–8, 555–65, 795–6) or, like Nestor, who cannot take part due to old age (615–23). His respect for Nestor in this episode is impeccable, in contrast to his total disregard for the old man's words of wisdom in Book 1. (You will find Book 23 in Reading 1.4 of Readings Book 1.)

Most changed is Achilles' attitude to Agamemnon. When he tactfully compliments Agamemnon on his ability in spear-throwing and even aborts the 'unnecessary' contest by declaring him the (literally) uncontested winner (889–94), he acknowledges that Agamemnon *is* the greatest of the Achaeans, albeit qualified by one skill (891: 'by how much you are greatest for strength among the spear-throwers'), a claim which he would not have conferred on him at the time of their quarrel in Book 1.

We realise that this is Achilles, an ideal hero, as he should be in normal contexts among his friends. He carries out Patroclus' funeral in a style worthy of his status as a prominent warrior. He entertains his guests generously and gives away prizes and gifts as appropriate, not so much for the success in the games itself as for the honour each character deserves within the group, as you see at the end of the chariot race. Here the distribution of honour and harmony within the company is skilfully handled by Achilles' leadership and diplomacy, by which even Agamemnon and Nestor appear to be flattered. Achilles, after acting out his role as the vengeful killing machine, now appears back in his normal position in civilised society.

## **3.6 *Iliad*, Book 24**

### **Friends and enemies**

'Helping friends and harming enemies' – this crude-sounding, pre-Christian principle of behaviour was the norm in the Homeric world of reciprocity, not to mention in Classical Greece and beyond. Do to others as



they do to you. The contrast between Achilles the perfect party host and Achilles the warrior is one good example, though with his temper he can make enemies out of his friends at any time, as the beginning of the poem has shown. As we have seen, friends can become enemies when some harm is done by one party to another. It is almost shocking to learn that the reason why the gentle Patroclus came to Peleus' household as a child was that he had killed a friend when they quarrelled over a game (*Iliad* 23.85–8). Warriors are a dangerous breed of men from a very early age.

After showing by far the best of chivalry Achilles now returns to his barbarity in the last book of the *Iliad*, Book 24. The book opens with a poignant description of Achilles mourning for his friend, remembering all the things they did together, shedding tears and

... lying  
sometimes along his side, sometimes on his back, and now again  
prone on his face ...

(*Iliad* 24.9–11)

Yet love for his friend means hatred for his enemy at the same time.

Achilles continues to display an extreme example of hatred by punishing the lifeless body of Hector, dragging it around behind his chariot (24.14–18).

The situation appears to continue indefinitely until the gods intervene. We as readers have privileged access to the debate of the gods which the human characters in the poem do not. The gods have been taking sides either for the Greeks or the Trojans throughout the poem, and the division recurs (24.23ff.). While all the other gods are filled with pity because Hector's body is being abused by Achilles, Troy's sworn enemies, Hera, Poseidon and Athena, oppose the idea of having Hermes rescue the body. These passages give us a glimpse of divine morality in Homer and are worth a close reading.

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### Exercise

Quickly read 24.1–32 (in Reading 1.5) to cover the story so far.

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### Apollo's speech

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### Exercise

Now read Apollo's argument (24.33–54). Make a note of any words or ideas which in your view reflect important social or moral values.





### Discussion

My notes read as follows, with the key words, as I see them, in bold. Don't worry if you have not spotted the same things as I have.

- 33 The gods are criticised for being **hard** and **destructive**. Presumably being hard and destructive is a bad thing and the opposite, such as being mild, is a good thing.
- 33–4 Hector used to perform sacrifices for the gods to **honour** them. It is implied that they have the obligation to reciprocate and support him in return.
- 36–8 Hector must be given proper **rites of burial** by his family. This implies that the importance of funerary rites is acknowledged by the gods.
- 40–3 Achilles is criticised for having no feelings of **justice** and for having a mind which cannot be bent and is as fierce as a lion's. Again a hard mind is criticised.
- 44–5 Achilles is criticised for not having **pity** or **shame**. Presumably the gods acknowledge these qualities as attributes of men of justice.
- 49 The necessity is for mortal men to have the heart of **endurance**. This must also be a quality expected of a successful human being.
- 52 Achilles' behaviour is damaging his **honour**.
- 53 **Great** as he is, he can make us [the gods] angry with such behaviour. (The word 'great' translates the Greek original *agathos* again.)

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Putting all this together, I get the impression that having all those qualities that Achilles currently seems to lack (i.e. being mild, having a sense of justice, pity and shame and the ability to endure grief) is necessary to maintain the honour due to his status as a 'great man'. There is also the threat that such behaviour as Achilles currently displays will eventually meet with divine anger, and those gods who tolerate Achilles' behaviour at present are not behaving properly towards Hector because they are 'hard' to him and not following the principle of reciprocity.



**Exercise**

Now read Hera's speech (56–63), which puts forward a counter-argument to that of Apollo. Then read Zeus' response (65–76), which provides the resolution to the debate. In each case, pay special attention again to social and moral concepts, especially honour and reciprocity, and think about the sort of behaviour expected of both gods and humans. This may be another good topic for you to discuss with your tutor or fellow students.

**Priam's visit to Achilles**

Most of the rest of Book 24 centres on Priam as the grieving father of Hector. As he has decided, Zeus helps to make it possible for Priam to visit Achilles in his own hut and ransom Hector's body. First, he makes Thetis let Achilles know of Zeus' will that he should give back Hector's body to his father (103–40). Secondly, he sends the messenger goddess Iris to Priam to encourage him to go direct to Achilles (142–227), following it up with a good omen when his wife Hecabe needs reassurance (305–21). Thirdly, they send Hermes as the escort for Priam so that he can get through the enemy camp to reach Achilles' hut without being detected (331–467). Thus the extraordinary scene in which Priam, king of Troy, comes face to face with Achilles, the mightiest of Greek heroes, follows.

**Exercise**

- 1 Read quickly lines 468–84, which set the scene.
- 2 Now read Priam's speech and Achilles' reply (485–551), then reread Priam's speech (485–506) and Achilles' immediate reaction (507–16) together. Note down the main points made by Priam and consider what values and social customs he invokes.
- 3 Reread Achilles' reply (517–51), noting down the main points he makes. Consider which points in Priam's speech are likely to have had most impact on Achilles and why.

**Discussion**

- 2 We can pick up a number of points in both speeches, but I consider the most important points in Priam's speech to be:
  - (a) the similarity between Priam and Achilles' father, Peleus. (Both are old and love their sons.)



- (b) Priam's pitiful destiny and the contrast between him and Peleus. (Priam has lost many sons including the dearest, Hector, whereas Peleus still has his living son, Achilles.)
- (c) that the gods are on the side of Priam because he is the suppliant (he is begging Achilles: 485).
- (d) that Priam has performed the extreme act of supplication (he has kissed the hand of his sons' killer, 506). Suppliants enjoy the same respect as visitors and guests as they are under the protection of Zeus. (This is hinted at in various places, for example, *Iliad* 24.158, 187, 570.) Besides, as we know – but Priam does not – Achilles has received the direct command from Zeus to treat Priam well.

3 Achilles' reply mostly corresponds with Priam's in that:

- (a) he remarks on Priam's daring in coming to him, mentioning the point that he is the killer of Priam's sons (see 2(d) above).
- (b) he mentions Zeus as the giver of good and bad human fortunes, which corresponds to Priam's point about his evil destiny (see 2(b) above).
- (c) he corrects Priam's point that Peleus is more fortunate than Priam, which enhances the similarity between them (see 2(a) above). Achilles does mention the gods, not as the protectors of suppliants, but as the dispensers of human sufferings which Achilles and Priam share.

Comparing these points and Achilles' immediate reaction to Priam's speech, I get the impression that Achilles was most moved by the parallel between his father and Priam, including the fate of lamenting the son's death which Achilles' father Peleus is about to experience soon. His tale of Zeus' urn also emphasises the common destiny of Priam and Achilles, and ultimately all mankind, in contrast with the eternally blessed gods. In this passage, Achilles appears to go beyond the conventional idea of 'friend' and 'enemy', seeing Priam and himself simply as fellow human beings living in the same world of sorrows bestowed by the gods. Although his anger at Patroclus' death has not entirely subsided (see 24.560–70), he even goes so far as to offer hospitality to Priam, which he accepts, and they do therefore become 'friends', albeit for this brief moment.



**Coda: Hector's funeral****Exercise**

Now read the remainder of Book 24 (552–804), which covers the rest of the exchange between Achilles and Priam, Priam's return journey with Hector's body and Hector's funeral. Women, especially Hector's female relatives, play a large role in the mourning of Hector; this is an important part of funerary rituals. Note especially the speeches by Hector's wife Andromache (725–45), his mother Hecabe (748–59) and his sister-in-law (and the cause of the war), Helen (762–75), all of which highlight the cruel cost of war that awaits women and children. The speeches also paint the picture of Hector as a much-loved warrior and family man. In his portrait, as in that of Achilles, we see the most striking dilemma of Homeric heroism, which demands the same person to be ruthless against his enemies and gentle towards his friends.

**3.7 Conclusion**

Before we leave this discussion of Homeric values, I would like you to reflect, informally, on the society, values and morals you have been studying, and to consider the extent to which they exist in modern society or societies with which you may be familiar. Are they similar? Are they the same or different? Or is the society different but the values and morals essentially the same? Whatever your conclusion here, it may be worth briefly reflecting on how and why Homer's *Iliad* remains a powerful work of poetic imagination today (if you believe it does).



## Part 4 Art and architecture of the Greek 'Dark Age' (exercises with DVD)

So far we have been looking at early Greece almost entirely through the medium of its major artistic product, the epic poems, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. Important though the Homeric poems obviously are, they are not going to be our only focus of attention in this block. In Part 4 we move on to a very different aspect of the period, its material evidence in architecture and visual art. Though scanty in their remains compared with Homer, the architecture, pottery and other objects from the ninth to seventh centuries BCE are nevertheless important both in themselves and for their relationship to the society in which they were made. In particular, we shall also consider their relationship to Homer.

As well as enlarging your knowledge of the period, Part 4 will also enable you to develop the skills of looking at objects and analysing what they contain and tell us (as you did with the poetry).

You will study this part of the block almost entirely through the visual medium of DVD1, Section 2: 'Art and architecture of the Greek "Dark Age"', which consists of a series of tracks, each focusing on a specific type of material evidence, with commentary by Robin Osborne, Professor of Ancient History at the University of Cambridge. You can view these track by track or all together, as you wish. Whichever method you choose, attempt the exercises which relate to the successive DVD tracks. These exercises and background information will be found in Audio-Visual Notes 1 and will comprise the whole of this week's work.



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### Exercise

You should now turn to the first track of DVD1, Section 2 and have ready Audio-Visual Notes 1, in which you will find instructions and notes.

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When you have finished working on DVD1, return to the block.



## Part 5 Homer's world

In Part 5 we build on the previous part by broadening the context in which we study Homer. 'Context' can mean different things: on the one hand, we can look at how details from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* fit into their context *within* the poems, which is largely what we were concentrating on in Parts 1–3 of this block. But putting in 'context' can also mean how the poems, taken as a whole, relate to a larger social and historical picture. Part 4 and the DVD for Block 1 have been moving us in this direction, and it is this latter sense which will be the main focus of the final part of this block.

As you have seen from the DVD, the so-called 'Age of Homer' might also be termed the 'Age of Geometric Pottery' (or other artistic products). In Part 4 we discovered that careful study of these objects reveals their artistic qualities and can, within the limitations imposed by the evidence, lead to the establishment of a social context. The question I want to pose here is: can we do the same for Homer?

The title I have chosen for Part 5, like 'context', can be taken in different senses: by 'Homer's world', do I mean the society depicted in the poems or the external world in which the poems were composed? This leads to further questions such as: what is the relationship between the two, and how can we investigate the relationship?

In the previous part of this block, you were introduced to an impressive range of visual evidence produced during the so-called 'Dark Age' – the ninth to mid-seventh centuries BCE. Connections between architecture, pottery, other artefacts and Homer were suggested, and common themes discussed. But, as you will have gathered, we need to be aware that the relationship is not an obvious or straightforward one.

### 5.1 Historical and geographical orientation

Before we go any further, let's check on facts, dates and places.

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#### Exercise

For this exercise you may use either the course website timeline for Block 1 (also printed in Appendix 2) or the timeline in *BHAG*.

- 1 Look at the timeline for Block 1 and make sure you are clear about the historical relationships between:
  - (a) the Late Bronze Age (the period of the large Mycenaean palaces);
  - (b) the main period of the Geometric pots;
  - (c) the composition of Homer.





Compare this in your mind with the kind of timeline you might encounter in a more recent period (or even the present time). What major differences occur to you?

### Discussion

Our timeline is a bit empty, isn't it? There are not many dates to go on and those that we have are not at all precise. This is because we are in what is essentially a 'pre-historic' period: there are no historical documents to give us a definite chronology (a point made in Part 1). So we have to rely on archaeology and other clues such as linguistic development to place events and objects in a proper relationship.

I would also emphasise two clear patterns, which you probably spotted:

- 1 The sheer distance we have to assume between the events Homer tells about – the (hypothetical) Trojan War and the age of the large Mycenaean palaces and the Homeric poems themselves – is over 450 years.<sup>2</sup> (This is approximately the distance from the present back to the reign in England of Elizabeth I.)
- 2 The cluster of significant events towards the end of our period (the last 150 years): the introduction of the alphabet, the major production of Geometric pottery and Homer. This, together with what archaeology tells us about changes in population and their representation in, for example, Athens, suggests some kind of cultural revival, of which Homer is the major example.

The archaeological record is unambiguous in its broad outlines: in the period in which the Trojan War (or something like it) may have occurred, there was a general devastation of the big centres of population at Mycenae and Pylos and elsewhere, which heralded the end of the Bronze Age. Following this was a period of decline about which we know very little (the term 'Dark Age' is a modern coinage – as mentioned in the note at the end of the introduction to this block, the Greeks did not call it that). The end of this period, the eighth to seventh centuries (800–650 BCE), saw the growth of populations and political concentration in centres such as Athens (see further in *BHAG*, pp. 36–43).

<sup>2</sup> I am calling the Trojan War 'hypothetical' because there is no firm evidence that a war resembling Homer's account actually took place. Archaeology at Troy has suggested some events which may be the basis of Homer. (This question is discussed further in Essay Two.)



**Exercise**

Look now at the map of the Aegean (either on the course website or in *BHAG*) and locate the following places which have figured in our discussions: Troy, Chios, Smyrna, Athens, Mycenae, Sparta, Pylos, Ithaca. Where, do you imagine, should we locate Greece? Where is the centre?

**Discussion**

A fact which immediately strikes us is that there is no obvious geographical centre: 'Greece' consists of a collection of settlements, not even focused on one particular land-mass. Rather they seem to be clustered around the Aegean Sea and across the edges of two continents, Europe and Asia, 'like frogs around a pond' (Plato's memorable phrase of the fourth century BCE, in his philosophical dialogue *Phaedo*, 109b). And, off this map to the west, there were settlements in Italy and Sicily which became increasingly important in later centuries.

What unified these disparate places was language. Despite major differences in the way they spoke and wrote Greek – in the early period especially, the language was a series of very different, perhaps only just mutually comprehensible, dialects – all Greek communities were conscious of using a single, distinctive language. The big exception in the list above is Troy. Homer, for obvious literary reasons, makes his Trojans speak Greek, but in fact we do not know much about the language which was spoken by the actual inhabitants of Troy, except that it certainly was not Greek.

It was at the linguistic level too, initially, that Greeks, however separated geographically from each other, distinguished themselves as a cultural group from other 'barbarians' (non-Greek speakers). If you have time, look up the entry 'barbarian' in the *OCCC* and you will see how the Greek/barbarian distinction became increasingly ideologically loaded in Greek culture (a topic you will have the opportunity to study in Block 2). In Bronze Age Mycenae and Pylos, the language was represented by a script called Linear B (deciphered as Greek in the 1950s), but after the general destruction of these palaces there is no evidence for any writing in the Greek world until the alphabet was introduced, adapted from the Phoenician script in the early eighth century BCE (possibly via trade). This rapidly became the universal way in which Greek was (and continues to be) written.



A look at geography also makes one other thing evident: the stories Homer tells range very widely – from Ithaca, Odysseus' home in the west,



via the Greek mainland cities like Mycenae, Sparta and Pylos, from where the warriors came who formed the great expedition against the Trojans, to Asia Minor and Troy in the east. The evidence of the predominant dialect in which the poems were composed suggests that they originated in the central coastal district of Asia Minor (the Greeks themselves did not know exactly where, but Smyrna and Chios are the most likely candidates). What is remarkable is how quickly they became 'international' or 'Panhellenic', in the sense that they spread quickly to all parts of the Greek world.

## 5.2 Homer and society

### Exercise

The Homeric poems clearly depict a society or societies. Looking back over the work you did for Parts 1–3, take a few minutes to reflect on what you consider to be the main characteristics of this society/societies.

### Discussion

I would list the following:

- 1 The settlements in which people live are small and geographically relatively isolated; this applies as much, comparatively speaking, to a citadel like Mycenae as it does to an island town like Ithaca. Forces like the Greek expedition in the *Iliad* consist of what appears to be an unusual collaboration of different groups from a wide diversity of locations, held together, as you have seen (e.g. the *Iliad*, Book 1), with some difficulty. There is no 'Greek nation' with centralised leadership, but a series of Greek peoples (often called by Homer 'Achaeans' or 'Danaans'), with their leaders from different areas (e.g. those of Achilles from Phthia, of Odysseus from Ithaca, of Agamemnon from Mycenae, of Menelaus from Sparta (Lacedaemon), or of Nestor from Pylos). Agamemnon seems to derive his leadership from the size of his forces and clearly has no permanent authority over the Greeks.
- 2 The social structure and values seem focused on the *aristoi*, literally the 'best' citizens, whose activities, success in battle and good advice in debate are what matters. The activities of the remainder seem confined to generalised back-up in fighting in battle, or reactions to the views of the *aristoi* (of approval or the reverse) in debate. In the *Iliad*, Book 1, neither they nor anyone else have the power to do anything about the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. The only non-aristocratic voice we hear in the *Iliad*, Thersites in Book 2, is



depicted in a highly unfavourable light. Despite the fact that he is making roughly the same criticisms against Agamemnon as Achilles had voiced in Book 1, Thersites' status precludes his being taken seriously; his protest is brutally squashed by Odysseus, with the vocal approval of the general body of troops (see Reading 1.2, the extract from the *Iliad* 2. 211–77).

- 3 The process of government in Homeric societies seems simple and oriented towards the power and prestige of the *aristoi*. As we saw at the end of the section 'The Assembly in Ithaca' in Part 1, for example, those called to the Assembly by Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, Book 2 are powerless to do anything about the activities of the suitors. The situation is finally resolved at the end of the poem with the death of the suitors at the hands of Odysseus and Telemachus themselves and a few faithful retainers (not forgetting the divine aid they receive from the goddess Athena).

### Exercise

From what you have learned about Homeric society and values, how far do you think this can be used as a source for the culture of the period in which the poems were composed? This question requires you to exercise judgement, and the best way of doing this initially is (as you were asked to do in Section 2.1) to assemble points 'for' and 'against'. In considering what you know about the period in which the poems were composed, you should also recap on what you learned in DVD1 (Section 2, Track 4) about the material culture of this period. Write brief notes on this before moving on.

### Discussion

- 1 I'll start with points against:
  - (a) The most obvious point here is surely that the events narrated by the poet are seen as occurring in the past: the Trojan War was seen as far distant and its heroes were finer and stronger than people of the poet's own day (as he explicitly tells us). Moreover, gods and goddesses were personally related to, and actually appeared in person to, humans. It seems unlikely that the people of Homer's day believed in personal relationships with divinities in quite this way.
  - (b) You may remember from DVD1 that the poet refers to objects which we know from archaeology were present in the period in which the poems were set (i.e. the late Bronze Age) and not in the eighth century BCE, for example, helmets,





spears and bronze weapons in general. The age in which Homer composed, on the other hand, is known as the Iron Age, chiefly because iron, and not bronze, was the metal used for weapons and tools; bronze tended to be a luxury item. Many of the references to weapons occur in formula and may have been preserved in the oral diction from generation to generation. (For the concept of a 'formula' refer back to the section 'Formula and generic composition' in Part 2.)

- (c) Homeric society seems in certain respects to be presented as a rich society: warriors' armour, for example, is depicted as containing precious metals, and buildings are described as 'shining' and elaborately constructed, harking back, it seems, to the grand palaces of late Mycenaean Greece. (For examples of the archaeological remains of these palaces, see Figures 1.12 and 1.13.) What we know about 'Dark Age' Greek houses suggests the reverse. The houses are architecturally simple, basically consisting of a single room on the ground floor, with a central hearth. (See *BHAG*, pp. 40–1 and the discussion in DVD1, Section 2, Track 2.)



Figure 1.12 The Mycenaean palace of Nestor at Pylos: the great hearth in the centre of the building. From Taylour, W. (1983, revised edn) *The Mycenaeans*, London, Thames & Hudson ('Ancient People and Places' series), Plate 76.



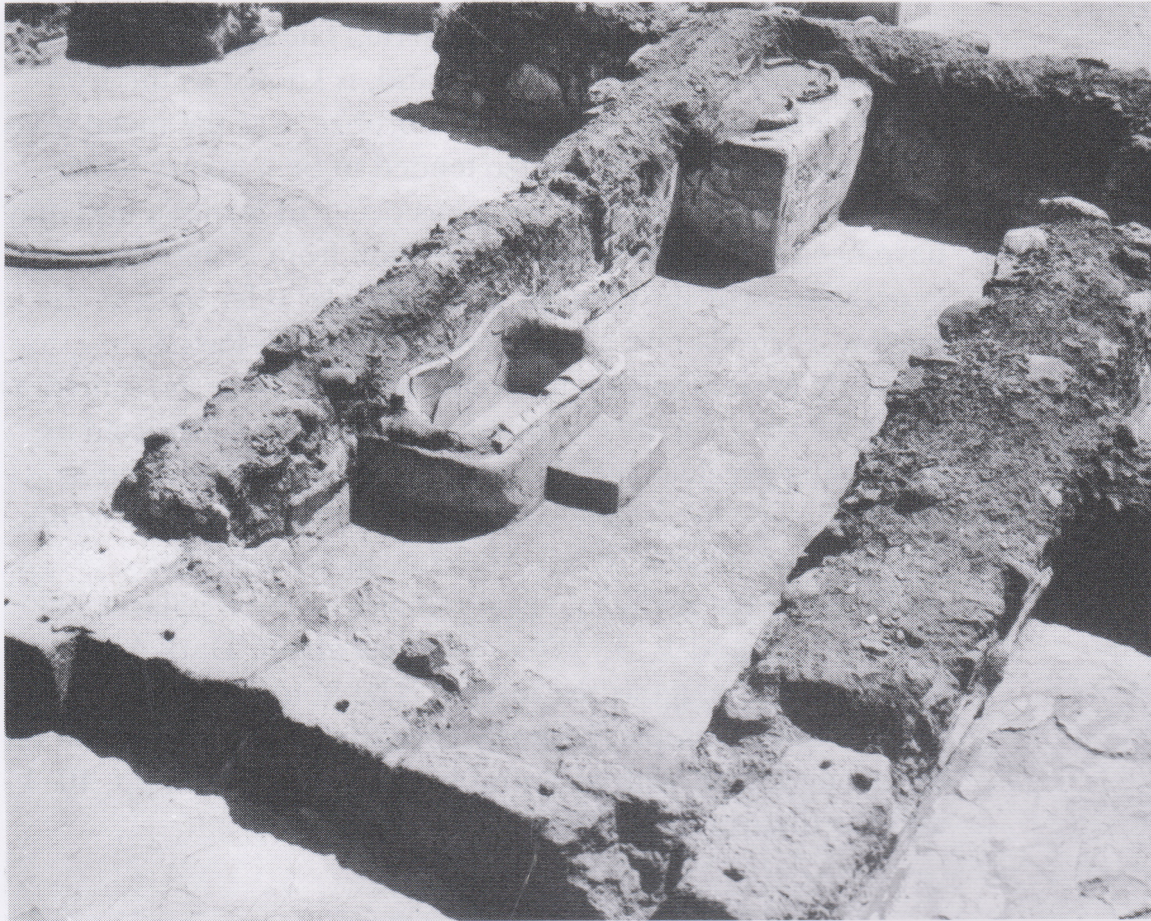


Figure 1.13 The Mycenaean palace at Pylos: a bathroom, with bath *in situ*. From Taylour, W. (1983, revised edn) *The Mycenaeans*, London, Thames & Hudson ('Ancient People and Places' series), Plate 78.

## 2 Now, points for:

- (a) First, the general 'common sense' point that in order to hold his audience's attention and interest the poet would, while talking about exotic and faraway people and places, need to relate it in at least some degree to the familiar. A balance of the exotic and familiar is likely. A possible argument here relates to the similes which, as you have seen (especially in CD1), purport to describe an action, state or emotion in the poem by comparing them to something else, frequently in the world of nature (winds, sea, wild animals, birds or insects, fields of crops, hunting) or human groups (humble people and occupations such as shepherds, farmers, a poor widow) engaged in everyday tasks. These images, the argument goes, range very widely and contrast sharply with the heroic ethos of the poem, and might be seen as relating more to the world of the audience, giving them a point of contact, as it were, with a far-off world in some respects alien to theirs. This





viewpoint gains some plausibility from the philological evidence that the language of the extended similes is later than that of other parts of the epic (see Shipp, 1972).

- (b) The points we made in answer to the previous questions about the society in the poems suggested a world that was geographically fragmented; this also relates to what we know about eighth-century BCE Greece.
- (c) Homer's society: the evidence of the Linear B tablets from Mycenaean Greece – the only form of Greek writing in existence prior to the alphabet – reveals a highly bureaucratic society far removed from the relatively personal and informal government of Ithaca portrayed in the *Odyssey*. (Again, if you have time, read what *BHAG* has to say about Linear B on pp.24–5 and look at the illustrated examples on p.29, Figure 1.5.) So, if Homer did not reflect the society of the late Greek Bronze Age, did his aristocratic warrior society have any relation to contemporary elites? It is hard to be precise here because we know so little about the society in which the poems were composed, but note the possible context established (see DVD1, Section 2, Tracks 3–4) for the large elaborately designed Geometric amphoras and bowls from the Kerameikos cemetery in Athens. These were, we were told, grave-markers – expensive prestige objects designed to display the status of the dead person and his or her family. It is possible that Homer, too, in his portrait of great individual *aristoi* such as Odysseus and Achilles, was reflecting the aspirations of an emergent aristocracy which wished to legitimise itself by emphasising its links to a heroic past. These are complex and contentious issues; for more detailed discussion, see Morris, 1986. For a grave of prominent aristocrats, from an earlier period (the ninth century BCE), see Figure 1.14.

The important point to note here is that the balance of evidence does not give a conclusive 'yes or no' answer; this was implicit, you may have noticed, in the 'How far ...' formulation of my original question. It is most likely that Homer's world refers to details from a number of different periods through which the stories had passed. However, while the poems cannot be taken as a straightforward source for the history and society of the period during which they were composed, there are suggestive interconnections. (This question is discussed further in Essay Two, 'The Homeric poems: ancient and modern perspectives', which you will read shortly.)





Figure 1.14 Lefkandi, Euboea: skeleton of a woman with gold jewellery from a 'heroic' burial, c.950 BCE. A dead warrior, of whom she was, presumably, the consort, and bodies of at least three horses had been thrown into a neighbouring shaft. Reproduced with permission of the British School of Athens Archives.

### 5.3 The viewpoint of Hesiod

There is one other vital source of evidence which we have not yet brought into the equation: the works of the poet Hesiod, a major literary source for the later 'Dark Age'. Like Homer, Hesiod cannot be dated with any certainty, although he is generally thought to have composed his poems slightly later than Homer, in the early seventh century BCE. Hesiod's poems are composed in the same verse metre and with the same style and language as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and like them may have been composed orally. (For further information, see the *OCCC* on 'Hesiod'.)

There, however, the similarity ends. Two poems of Hesiod survive complete: the *Theogony* (*Genealogy of the Gods*) and the *Works and Days*. These,





at around 800–1000 lines each, are much shorter than the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. The *Works and Days*, of which we are going to study a section, is radically different from Homer in a number of ways:

- 1 In *Works and Days*, unlike Homer, Hesiod focuses on the present, not the past, and his account of past relationships between humans and gods is focused on the implications for the here and now. He also reveals his own personality and the circumstances of his life: he is, or presents himself as being, a small farmer, performing his poems in or around Boeotia, to the north of Athens on the Greek mainland. He has a brother called Perses, with whom he has a dispute about inherited property.
- 2 In contrast to Homer, we are given the perception not of rulers but of a lowlier stratum of society, that of the small farmer who has to make a living in difficult circumstances. We are also given glimpses of 'government', again, not from the point of view of a king, an Odysseus or Agamemnon, but from 'underneath'. This is a world of which Homer gives us glimpses (e.g. in the similes), but which is central to Hesiod's existence.
- 3 In Homer the gods play a major role, especially, as you have seen, in the *Iliad*, but they are in a sense 'given', and we learn little about how they have evolved to where they are now (as Hesiod sees it). The *Theogony* (which you will not be reading) tells us most about the gods' actual evolution, but in *Works and Days* Hesiod also develops an important perspective on their evolving relationship with humans which we do not learn about from Homer.



### Exercise

Read the extract from *Works and Days* (Reading 1.6). Consider how you would add detail to the three main points made above (i.e. Hesiod's personality, his circumstances and his perception of the gods' relationship with mortals).

### Discussion

- 1 You may remember that Homer's narrative style was, it seems almost deliberately, impersonal – the poet rarely intruded his own views onto the narrative of past events. Hesiod is the reverse; he makes his own views quite plain. His brother Perses is a waster who has cheated him of his inheritance and prefers hanging around the town to hard work. Note how the narrative style 'creates' the personality here.



- 2 Right from the beginning of *Works and Days*, Hesiod emphasises strife, which has two aspects ('Upon the earth / Two Strifes exist'): the strife which involves war and the strife which encourages competition, without which the little man will not survive:

So neighbour vies with neighbour in the rush  
For wealth: this Strife is good for mortal men –  
Potter hates potter, carpenters compete,  
And beggar strives with beggar, bard with bard.

(*Works and Days* 25–28)

We are also given a glimpse of a perception of corrupt 'rulers', whom Hesiod calls *basileis* ('kings'). This is the word used to describe many of the rulers in Homer (e.g. the suitors in the *Odyssey*). In Hesiod they are 'lords who swallow bribes' (281), and have by implication accepted gifts to favour Perses against his brother Hesiod in the matter of the inheritance. The 'government', which Hesiod refers to so witheringly, seems to consist of an aristocratic group of 'kings' who have, among other things, judicial functions.

- 3 Perhaps the most interesting and innovative aspect of Hesiod's *Works and Days* from our point of view is what it tells us about the gods. From being a partisan group in the *Iliad*, they have become a group which reward and punish mortals for good and bad conduct (especially Zeus, the king of the gods), a function which is already evident in the *Odyssey*, assuming that this poem precedes Hesiod's. And in Hesiod we are much more aware of figures like Justice, which are transparent personifications of what Hesiod considers the right and profitable conduct of life (e.g. 225ff.). This concern with justice underlies Hesiod's intensely pessimistic attitude towards the relationship between gods and mortals. Homer's more general distinction between the heroic past and the present is given much more precision: from a 'golden age' in which mortals lived without care, there has been a gradual descent to a race of iron, in which

... by day  
Men work and grieve unceasingly; by night  
They waste away and die.

(*Works and Days* 183–85)

This is closely related to another myth in which Zeus is punishing mortals for the theft of the essential ingredient of life: fire. In 45ff. Hesiod tells of the myth of Prometheus, the god who attempted to



help mortals by stealing fire, and the disastrous consequences for him at the hands of Zeus.

Hesiod was less important than Homer in the eyes of later generations of Greeks. But, unlike Homer, he was a great systematiser— he fitted all known theology and human history into a clear structure of development, including what was believed about the Trojan War:

And some, who crossed the open sea in ships,  
For fair-haired Helen's sake, were killed at Troy

(*Works and Days* 167–68)

This is a brief intermission in the inexorable moral decline and, don't forget, this was 'the past' for the Greeks of this time (and much later); they did not have our knowledge of their past gleaned from archaeology. From the brief extract you have read it is clear that in Hesiod's case, this structure was largely a cosmic explanation of human decline based on increasingly evil and lawless behaviour. His moral and theological outlook, especially the myth of decline from a golden age, presented one aspect of human civilisation which had great importance for the later world outlook of the Greeks and the Romans, as you will discover in later blocks of the course.

### Exercise

One final brief question (which we have also been asking about Homer): on, admittedly, a brief acquaintance, how do you value Hesiod as evidence for Greek society in the period we are considering in this block? Think about this for a few minutes.

### Discussion

Your view may be that you would value Hesiod pretty highly; unlike Homer, he seems to be talking about events of his own time which he was personally experiencing and which affected him greatly. There seems to be a strongly autobiographical element in Hesiod. There may also be a tendency for you to see a 'little man's view' as more realistic than the heroic ethos of Homer (especially as presented in the *Iliad*). The marked emphasis in the poem on the lone farmer seems to reflect what we know from archaeological surveys of a landscape of small isolated agricultural units.

This may in general be relied on, but if you try to draw more specific evidence from the text, caution is needed. *Works and Days* is a poem, and the poet is concerned to entertain by projecting a personality



which may not literally reflect his situation; whatever social comment we detect is filtered through an artistic persona and performance.

### Exercise



On this particular aspect of Homer and Hesiod, you should now read the second part of Essay Three, 'Sing Muse: authorial voices in early Greek poetry' (from the section entitled 'Hesiod – the farmer-poet from Boeotia' to the end, pp.78–84) and consider whether what is said about Hesiod there affects your view of the poet as a source for his times. The section on 'Sappho – a female voice from ancient Greece', p.81, although not directly related to this block, can be read for related interest.

## 5.4 Conclusion: back to Homer

For this final section on 'Homer's world' we are going to return to where we started, and what in this period we know most about: the world of the Homeric poems themselves. I want you to go away from this block with some idea, among other things, of Homer's artistic range, how he presented the past and present, and especially how he managed to construct a world, which, real or fantasy or something of both, succeeded in capturing the imagination of later ages: Greek, Roman and beyond. In many ways, this is perhaps more important for us than the question we have been considering above: whether, strictly speaking, the poems actually reflect their contemporary society.

I have chosen a specific context from the *Odyssey*, the passage in Book 8 where Odysseus listens to the Phaeacian bard, Demodocus, singing of an event which effectively ended the Trojan War, the entrance of the Wooden Horse into Troy (8.485–532). This occurs during an entertainment by the Phaeacians for their distinguished, but up to this point incognito, guest, Odysseus. Prominent in this entertainment are three performances by the Phaeacian bard Demodocus,

whom the Muse had loved greatly, and gave him both good and evil.  
She reft him of his eyes, but she gave him the sweet singing  
art ...

(*Odyssey* 8.63–65)

Demodocus' first two songs are strongly contrasted: the first (73–82) tells of an incident from the Trojan War involving Odysseus himself, a quarrel with Achilles, the revived memory of which draws tears from Odysseus, which he tries to conceal from his hosts; the second forms a total contrast, the



song of Ares and Aphrodite (266–366), a light-hearted tale of illicit love and exposure among the gods. (Reading this is optional, but worth it if you have the time.) The third song, requested by Odysseus, reverts to the serious: the tale of the Trojan Horse (see Figure 1.15), by which the Greeks tricked the Trojans into admitting them into their city and thereby secured their downfall.



Figure 1.15 Details from the neck of a funerary relief *pithos* (wine-jar) from the island of Mykonos (in the Aegean), c.675 BCE. Height of the field on the neck, 32.5cm. Mykonos Museum. Photo: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Athens. The scene is of the Trojan Horse at the sack of Troy, with warriors inside and outside the horse. This *pithos* is significant as one of the earliest surviving artistic representations of the Trojan legend, probably not from Homer (though the wooden horse does feature at *Od.* 8.50ff. and 4.271–89), but from the stories of the Epic Cycle (e.g. *Little Iliad*).



### Exercise

Read the *Odyssey*, Book 8.485–586 (the end of the book), paying particular attention to 485–532. As you are now quite familiar with analytical approaches to the Homeric text, this time I would like you to try to broaden your perspective and consider the following:

- 1 What is the dramatic function of the scene as a whole (thinking also of the events which precede and follow it)?



- 2 How does Demodocus' recitation relate to the world of his audience?
- 3 Consider Odysseus' reaction (the simile in 523–30). What is the effect of the comparison of Odysseus crying to a captive female war victim?  
Give this exercise some 15 minutes (and make notes if you wish) before reading the discussion below.

### Discussion

- 1 The scene heralds a major climax in the poem: Odysseus' revelation of his identity to the Phaeacians (which finally happens at 9.19). The poet has turned one of the conventions of *xenia* – not asking for a stranger's identity until you have given hospitality (remember Menelaus and Telemachus in Book 4) – into a dramatic *tour de force*, stretching over more than three Books of the poem. Odysseus deliberately withholds his identity longer than strictly socially appropriate, ostensibly, one supposes, out of habitual caution. But this commonsense explanation turns out to be superficial, since in this final story Odysseus himself actually provokes the circumstance which leads to his being forced into self-revelation – given that it is he who requests the tale of the Trojan Horse, a story which concerns him intimately and the memory of which again (see 8.83–92) provokes his tears. Two aspects of this have broader dramatic significance:

- (a) the general emotional effect for us all of recalling in tranquillity times of suffering and hardship and climactic events, whether or not we were personally involved. We can all identify with Odysseus here; note also the ironic contrast between audiences: the detached Phaeacians, who can simply enjoy it as a story from far-off, as it has nothing directly to do with them, and Odysseus himself, whom it has everything to do with;
- (b) the dramatic effect of the long withholding of identity. One aspect of this is the rising tension of expectation, and also the presence of 'dramatic irony'. We, the audience, know who Odysseus is, but his hosts do not, and what he says and does has one meaning for them and a special meaning for us, the audience in the know: for example, Odysseus' compliment to Demodocus:

for all too right following the tale you sing the Achaians'  
venture, all they did and had done to them, all the sufferings  
of these Achaians, as if you had been there yourself or heard it  
from one who was ...

(*Odyssey* 8.489–92)



This from one who has, of course, 'been there himself' (to put it mildly!). In the tension of withheld identity, this scene foreshadows the much longer example in Books 14–22 (the disguised Odysseus on Ithaca). And dramatic irony anticipates a systematic use of the device in fifth-century BCE tragedy.

- 2 The choice of a story from the Trojan War, like Phemius' 'Homecomings' in Book 1, links several worlds. First, the world of the War itself; although the incident of the Trojan Horse does not occur in the *Iliad*, it definitely belongs to that world, in contrast to the peaceful society of the Phaeacians. The Phaeacian audience of the *Odyssey* hear the story of how Troy actually fell to the Greeks as an event which already has its *kleos* ('fame') which shortly extends to the distinguished participant sitting incognito among them. There is a startling contrast here. The condensed story of deception and violence is injected into the civilised, detached world of the Phaeacians, who receive it as an entertainment alongside the amusing story of the nefarious activities of the gods. Then there is Homer's own audience, listening to the story. And Demodocus the blind bard (62–5) brings us, by implication, into the picture; we are listening too. The poet has the ability – which, incidentally, he demonstrates again and again – to take a specific event and, by enlarging on its *kleos*, to link it with a variety of contrasted audiences, giving it universal significance. He is creating a whole world, past (the Trojan War), present (Odysseus at the Phaeacian court) and future (his audiences and audiences to come, including ourselves).
- 3 The simile in lines 523–30 works on a number of levels. First, by contrast: we are startled to hear the weeping of Odysseus, the epitome of masculine heroism and daring, compared to that of a helpless woman. Yet there is a sense in which his crying, and possibly the emotion provoking it, resembles that of a captive woman: the apparently inappropriate makes its effect by our perception of its underlying fitness for the context. The simile also, like Demodocus' story itself, takes us back to the world of the *Iliad*, but with an emphasis on the violence perpetrated against the victims of war, women who have lost their sole protectors and are doomed to a life of slavery. This breadth of vision would surely have reminded the original audience of the *Iliad* itself, of the person of Andromache, the wife, then widow of Hector. Her lament over his corpse in *Iliad* 24.723ff. rehearses the themes of the *Odyssey* simile in what was, for her, the reality: the dead husband as protector of wife and children ('children' particularly poignant in view of the imminent fate of



Andromache and Hector's baby son, Astyanax – to be thrown from the walls of Troy (see Andromache's foreshadowing of this event at 735), and for her a future life of slavery (this passage is to be found in the *Iliad* 24). What Homer does here is forge a bond of sympathy not only between a heroic leader and the apparent opposite end of the spectrum, helpless women and children, but also between victors and vanquished in war. The passage also deepens our perception of the character of Odysseus. He is not simply clever, resourceful and enduring; his intelligence and emotional capacity, as well as his previous experiences, have enabled him to perceive the suffering and sense of loss not incidental to, but inherent in, the prevailing heroic ethos of the poem.

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The reason I have chosen this context with which to end the block is to demonstrate the way in which Homer uses specifics (a particular feast in a particular location) to suggest broad and indeed universal themes, which he connects together in a striking way. Moreover, much of Homer's artistry and thematic treatment was an inspiration for later creative poets and dramatists: for example, the dramatic tension and irony of Book 8 (see point 1 above in the discussion) anticipates the techniques of fifth-century BCE drama, just as the suffering woman of the simile (and her real counterpart in Andromache of the *Iliad*, Book 24) suggests a prototype for the character of heroines in the plays. On an even broader front, Homer's (and Hesiod's) presentation of the gods was acknowledged – for example, by the fifth-century BCE historian Herodotus (*The Histories* 2.53) – as forming the basis of Greek theology, and the heroic values found in the *Iliad* formed a very large part of the idea of male excellence which later Greeks aspired to imitate.

To conclude: 'Homer's world' is an ambivalent concept. It can mean the late 'Dark Age' Greek world contemporary with the creation of the poems or it can mean the world constructed by the poet which was related to, but certainly not identical with, late eighth-century BCE Greek culture (of which, of course, it was itself a major part). Consequently, there are a number of ways in which one can approach this earliest period of Greek civilisation. One way is to look at the rich variety, although rather scanty remains, of the material culture of the period, as we did in Part 4; as you saw, there is much in the architectural and pottery evidence which suggests a rich development of culture in a society which was emerging from a 'Dark Age', as well as some interesting links with the Homeric poems themselves. Another way is to examine the artistry of the verse and the values of the society (real or not) which the Homeric poems, and of course the tradition of poetry behind them, created. In this block we have tried to



introduce you to both of 'Homer's worlds' and how they illuminate this earliest period of Greek civilisation.



### Exercise

Before you write TMA 02 you should read Essay Two, 'The Homeric poems: ancient and modern perspectives'. You should find this essay useful as a consolidation of the themes of Block 1 as a whole.



As explained in the Course Introduction, this exploration of the Classical world is just that; it is not a survey which covers all periods. So you will (after completing TMA 02) be jumping from the age of Homer, Hesiod and the Geometric pots, forward in time by some 250 years to the beginning of what is known as the Classical period (starting *c.* 500 BCE). No course embracing Greek and Roman civilisation and studying things in some depth can cover all periods; this is why we are passing over the seventh and sixth centuries, interesting though these undoubtedly are. If you have time and wish to fill in the gap, you are recommended to read *BHAG*, Chapters 3 and 4.



## Part 6 TMA 02

This week's work will be devoted to the writing of your second TMA, an essay of not more than 1,000 words, which will complete your study of Block 1. This essay will give you the opportunity to bring together the various topics and issues covered in the block.

For the topic of TMA 02 and instructions for tackling it, see the Assignment Book.



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## Appendix 1 The *Odyssey*: brief factual notes on Books 1–4

The translator Richmond Lattimore consistently uses the Greek spelling of names. Following course practice, these notes give the commonly used Latin spelling (which you will also find in the block discussions). Where there is a marked difference between the two, the Latin form appears in brackets after the Greek.

### Book 1

- 1 **Muse:** the goddess of poetry through whose inspiration the poet will create his poem.  
**The man of many ways:** Odysseus, the hero of the poem, versatile, resourceful, much travelled.
- 2 **Troy's sacred citadel:** the city in north-west Asia Minor sacked by a Greek expedition, of which Odysseus was one of the leaders.
- 11 **Then all the others:** those of Odysseus' fellow leaders who arrived safely home from Troy after its capture.
- 13 **This one alone:** Odysseus.  
**His wife:** Penelope.
- 20 **Poseidon:** brother of Zeus, king of the gods; god of the sea and of horses, associated with earthquakes. He is angry with Odysseus because Odysseus blinded his one-eyed son, the monster Cyclops, Polyphemus (in *Odyssey*. 9.166–542).
- 24 **Hyperion:** another name for the sun.  
**setting ... rising:** the west and the east.
- 25 **hecatomb:** a sacrifice to a god (*literally* of a hundred oxen).
- 27 **Olympian gods:** the most important of the gods, who live on Mt Olympus.
- 29 **Aigisthos (Aegisthus):** he seduced Klytaimnestra (Clytemnestra), the wife of Agamemnon, leader of the expedition to Troy while he was away, and murdered him on his return.
- 30 **Orestes:** Agamemnon's son avenged his father by killing Aegisthus (and also Clytemnestra).
- 36 **the wife of Atreus' son:** a roundabout way of referring to Clytemnestra ('Atreus' son' is Agamemnon).
- 38 **Hermes:** a god who functions as messenger (also called Argeiphontes, 'the slayer of Argos', see line 84).
- 40 **Atreides:** Agamemnon (son of Atreus).



- 44 **Athene:** an important goddess (Athena), who supports Odysseus and his son throughout the poem.
- 45 **Son of Kronos:** Zeus.
- 51 **a goddess:** Kalypso (Calypso), see line 14.
- 52 **Atlas:** father of Calypso, with reference here to his role in sustaining the heavens.
- 59 **Olympian:** refers to Zeus.
- 61 **ships of the Argives:** the Greek expedition to Troy ('Argives' is one of the many ways Homer refers to the Greeks.)
- 69 **Cyclops:** see the note on line 20 above.
- 85 **Ogygia:** the island where Calypso is detaining Odysseus.
- 89 **his son:** Telemachus, the central character of the first four Books of the poem.
- 90 **Achaians (Achaeans):** Greeks.
- 91 **suitors:** nobles from Ithaca and surrounding islands who are courting Penelope on the assumption that Odysseus is either lost or dead.
- 93 **Sparta and sandy Pylos:** places in Greece where the prominent Greek leaders Menelaus and Nestor live.
- 125 **Pallas:** a name (epithet) of the goddess Athena.
- 189 **Laertes:** elderly father of Odysseus.
- 233 **a certain man:** Odysseus.
- 246 **Doulighion, Same, Zakynthos:** islands in the domain of Odysseus.
- 284–5 **Nestor ... Menelaos:** see the note on line 93.
- 298–300 For the story, see above lines 29–43.
- 326–7 **bitter homecoming from Troy:** the experiences of the various expedition leaders on their return voyages, some of which were disastrous.
- 344 **Hellas ... midmost Argos:** both referring generally to 'Greece'.
- 350 **Danaans:** Greeks.
- 383 **Antinoös (Antinous):** leader of the suitors.
- 428 **Eurykleia:** the aged nurse of Odysseus and Telemachus.

## Book 2

- 19 **and now the wild Cyclops had killed him:** a reference to Odysseus' adventure with his comrades in Book 9, where a



- number of them were killed in the Cyclops' cave (see note on 1.20).
- 68 **Themis**: goddess of order and justice.
- 72 **strong-greaved**: an epithet of the Achaeans (a 'greave' is an item of leg armour).
- 99 **hero Laertes**: Penelope's father-in-law.
- 133 **pay back Ikarios**: Telemachus would have to pay back Penelope's dowry to Ikarios, her father, if he sent her away from Ithaca.
- 135 **her furies**: spirits who punish crimes within the family.
- 147 **two eagles**: birds of omen.
- 173 **Ilion**: Troy.
- 175 **in the twentieth year**: the war at Troy lasted ten years, and Odysseus has been wandering for a further ten.
- 198 **sons of the Achaians**: themselves, the suitors.
- 421 **strong Zephyros**: the west wind.

### Book 3

- 1 **Helios**: the sun.
- 2 **brazen sky**: the Greeks at this time believed that the sky was a solid dome made of bronze.
- 4 **Neleus**: father of Nestor.
- 6 **Earthshaker**: the god Poseidon.
- 9 **these**: the people of Pylos.
- 10 **these others**: Telemachus and his followers.
- 68 **Gerenian horseman**: epithet of Nestor.
- 88 **son of Kronos**: see the note on 1.45.
- 91 **billows of Amphitrite**: Amphitrite was goddess of the sea.
- 106 **Achilleus (Achilles)**: the most important hero of the *Iliad*.
- 107 **the lord Priam**: the elderly ruler of Troy.
- 109 **Aias**: also known as Ajax (1) important leader at Troy (son of Telemon), to be distinguished from another Ajax (2) (see Book 4.499ff.).
- 110 **Patroklos (Patroclus)**: Greek warrior, companion of Achilles, whose death Achilles avenged by killing the leader of the Trojans, Hector.
- 133 **not all were considerate nor righteous**: the poet is not particularly forthcoming about what (some of) the Greeks did



wrong to provoke Athena's anger; later commentators believed that Homer is here referring to the religious crime committed by Ajax (2) in raping the Trojan Cassandra, Priam's daughter, and priestess of the god Apollo.

- 159 **Tenedos:** an island off the Asia Minor coast.  
 167 **son of Tydeus:** Diomedes, a Greek leader.  
 169–70 **Lesbos ... Chios:** large islands off Asia Minor.  
 175 **Euboa (Euboea):** a large island just off the east coast of Greece.  
 178 **Geraistos:** a promontory of Euboea.  
 182 **Argos:** city of the north-eastern Peloponnese.  
 189 **the glorious son of great-hearted Achilles:** Neoptolmus, who led Achilles' followers (Myrmidons) after his death at Troy.  
 190–1 **Philoktetes ... Idomeneus:** prominent Greek leaders.  
 193–8 For this story, see 1.29–43. Athena and Telemachus return to it again at 232ff. and 248ff., and Nestor elaborates at 255ff.  
 288 **Maleia:** the southernmost tip of Greece; Menelaus has to sail round it to get home to Sparta.  
 378 **Tritogeneia:** yet another name for the goddess Athena.

#### Book 4

- 1 **Lakedaimon:** Sparta.  
 5 **son of Achilles:** Neoptolmus.  
 14 **Hermione:** daughter of Menelaus.  
 51 **Menelaos the son of Atreus:** Menelaus is the brother of Agamemnon.  
 69 **son of Nestor:** Pisistratus, who is accompanying Telemachus on his journey.  
 83–4 **Phoenicia ... Sidonians ... Libya:** Menelaus' travels took him to the eastern Mediterranean.  
 91 **another man killed my brother:** an allusion to the murder of Agamemnon (see Book 1.35ff. and 3. *passim*).  
 121 **Helen:** wife of Menelaus, whose abduction by Paris (son of Priam, ruler of Troy) the Trojan War was waged to avenge; now reconciled to her husband.  
 122 **Artemis:** goddess, daughter of Zeus.  
 187 **Antilochos:** brother of Pisistratus, son of Nestor, killed fighting at Troy.



- 207–8 **Kronos' son**: Zeus (see 1.45).
- 261–2 **the madness that Aphrodite / bestowed when she led me there away from my own dear country ...**: Helen attributes her original agreement to her abduction to the madness brought on her by the goddess of love, Aphrodite.
- 272 **the wooden horse**: a major incident which effectively ended the Trojan War; the horse was devised by Odysseus and Greeks hidden inside it succeeded in capturing Troy.
- 276 **Deiphobos**: the man whom Helen married when Paris had been killed.
- 280 **son of Tydeus**: Diomedes, a Greek leader at Troy.
- 349 **the Old Man of the Sea**: Proteus.
- 386 **He is Poseidon's underthegn**: a subsidiary ruler of the sea under the god Poseidon.
- 445 **ambrosia**: divine food (often found along with nectar, a divine drink).
- 499 **Aias was lost**: this is Ajax (2) – see 3.109.
- 512ff. **Your brother**: Agamemnon, whose murder is again recounted here in some detail (512–37).
- 515 **Maleia**: see 3.288.
- 546–7 **... or perhaps Orestes / has beaten you to the kill** (see 1.29).
- 563–4 **but the immortals will convoy you to the Elysian / Field**: the special place reserved for Menelaus in the afterlife by virtue of his relationship to Helen.
- 617 **Hephaistos**: the god of metalworking.
- 628 **Antinoös and Eurymachos**: leaders of the suitors of Penelope.
- 654 **Mentor**: the helper of Telemachus whose person Athena took as a disguise (at the end of Book 2).
- 722 **the Olympian**: Zeus.
- 725 **Danaans**: Greeks.
- 742 **Eurykleia**: also Telemachus' nurse (see 1.428).
- 755 **seed of Arkeisios**: father of Laertes, so Odysseus' family line.
- 762 **Atrytone**: epithet of the goddess Athena.



## Appendix 2 Timeline: Homer and the Greek 'Dark Age'

All dates are approximate.

|               |                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1600–1150 BCE | Late Bronze Age: flourishing of important centres at, for example, Mycenae and Pylos.<br>Linear B writing (an early form of Greek).<br>Major settlement at Troy (Troy VI). |
| c.1250 BCE    | The Trojan War.                                                                                                                                                            |
| 1150–1100 BCE | The collapse of Mycenaean civilisation.                                                                                                                                    |
| 1100–900 BCE  | The 'Dark Age' in Greece.                                                                                                                                                  |
| c.900 BCE     | Buildings at Nichoria and Lefkandi.                                                                                                                                        |
| 800 BCE       | Beginning and development of alphabetic writing.                                                                                                                           |
| 776 BCE       | Traditional date of the first Olympic Games.                                                                                                                               |
| 750–700 BCE   | Creation of the large Geometric pots in the Kerameikos cemetery at Athens.                                                                                                 |
| 720–700 BCE   | The Homeric poems composed.                                                                                                                                                |
| 700–650 BCE   | Hesiod's <i>Theogony</i> and <i>Works and Days</i> composed.                                                                                                               |







Arts: Level 2

# A219 Exploring the Classical World



The Open University

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